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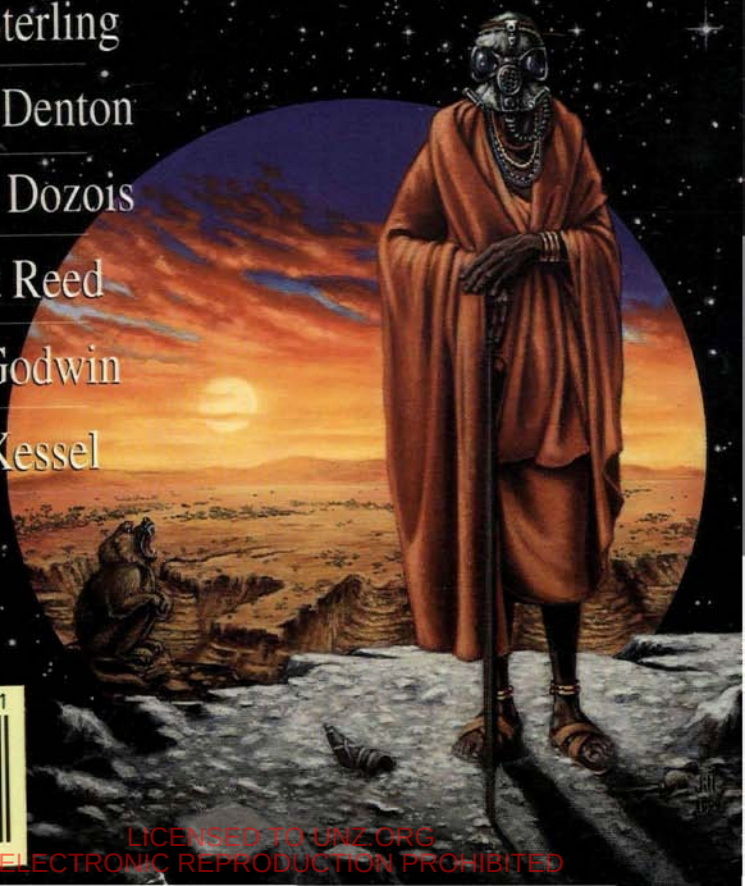

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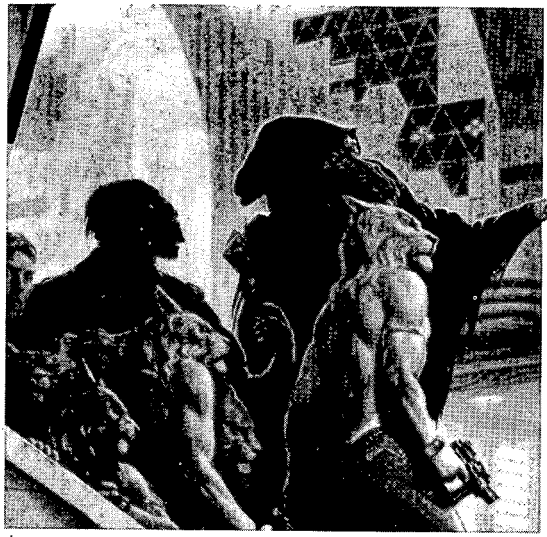

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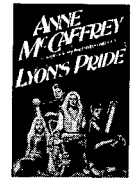

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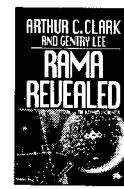

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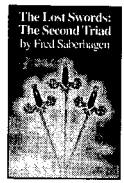

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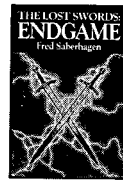

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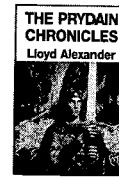

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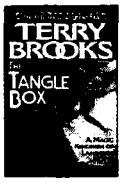

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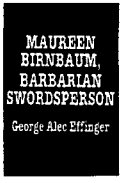

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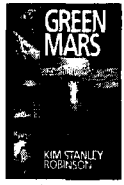

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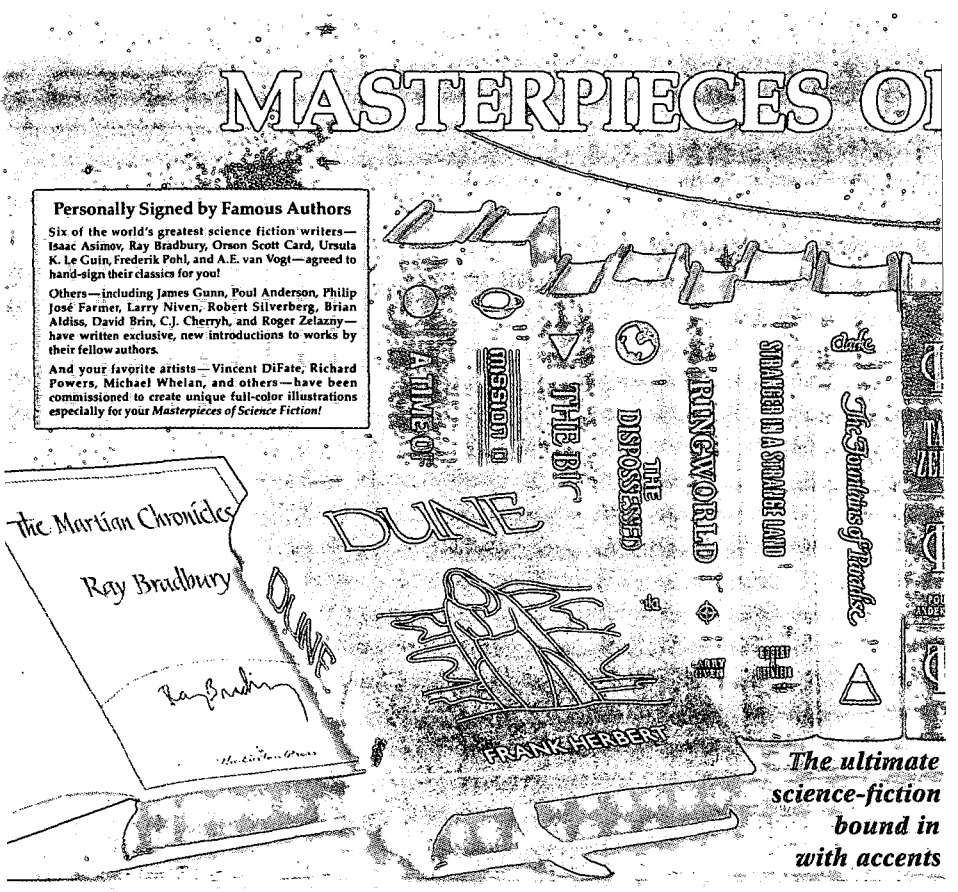
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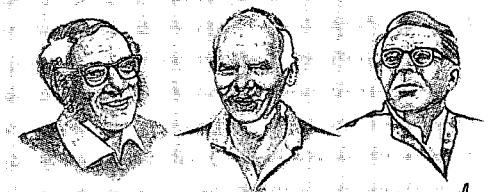

Gateway. Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game*, Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and A.E. van Vogt, *Slan*. And, Isaac Asimov signed a number of copies of *The Foundation Trilogy* before his death in 1992 (due to their limited supply, you should act promptly to avoid disappointment). These extraordinary

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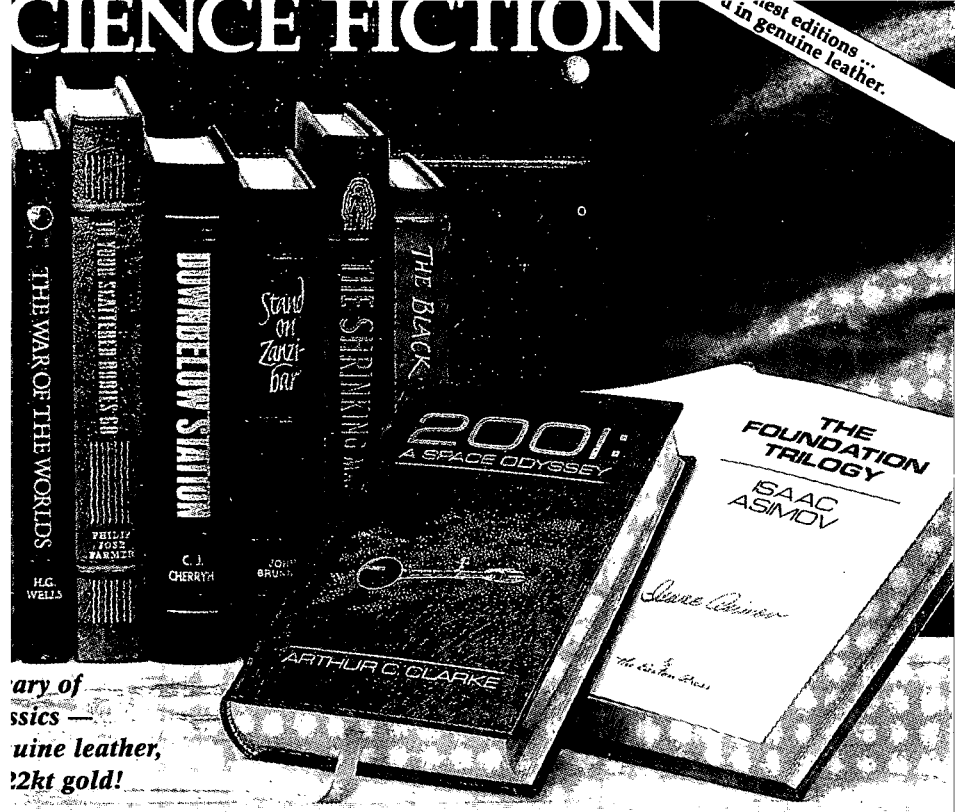

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EDITORIAL

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

ALTERNATE History on *Nightline*. A humorous examination of cyberspace in *The New Yorker*. An incredibly advanced smart house in a beer commercial. Science Fiction has hit the mainstream with a vengeance and the mainstream, it seems, is doing a better job of imagining the future than we are.

I write this editorial on the fiftieth anniversary of D-Day. Tonight *Nightline* repeated its show from the fortieth anniversary — a fictional examination of the invasion using current technology: how we would have seen the war had live television and satellites existed in 1944. In the middle of the program, a commercial for *PrimeTime* aired showing disabled children attached to VR helmets, learning (in Sam Donaldson's words) "to fly."

This morning as I ate breakfast, I read the "Shouts and Murmurs" section of the May 30th *New Yorker* in which Charlie Varon postulates how our reading habits will change when most of us read the *Times* online. His fake articles are sfnal and his point is as biting as any science fiction story's can be.

As startling as those two events were, however, the most startling to me is the beer commercial in which the young stud comes home, tells his apartment what kind of decor he would like as he opens the door, asks the computer to adjust the temperature (and snow falls), orders a beer and a woman — all provided in the blink of an eye. Sure, the idea is old in sf terms, but rarely as well visualized. And other commercials are exploring the same turf. (Like the ATT commercials about the technology of the future, or the Zima commercial which begins with the announcer saying, "Imagine a world with no beer" as two guys from our world enter a bar, and order a beer. The bartender looks at them as if they're crazy — and when told there is no beer, they *act* crazy, whispering in a panicked fashion between

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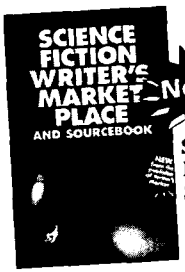

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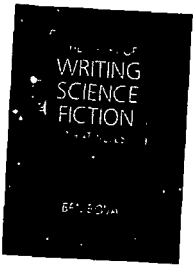

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themselves. They see a woman drinking Zima and order one — and then ask for pretzels, only to discover that pretzels don't exist either...)

Then I go to my desk on which sits manuscripts from folks hoping to sell a story to the magazine. Most science fiction writers still believe that sf should be rockets and rayguns. Their idea of the future is the fifties ideal — a few good men in a rocket on the way to the stars. This story works if it says something to a nineties audience, and recognizes the changes in science that have occurred in the last forty years. But much of what I read, from pros and neophytes alike, imagines a future we have already glimpsed and, in some cases, discarded.

Or worse, sf writers haven't researched the present. Just the other day, I received a story from a published pro about the uses of virtual reality to help the disabled. Gosh, Sam Donaldson is already covering that beat. On Saturday, I went into a major electronics warehouse and kids were buying 5 minutes of VR experience for five bucks. Half the letters I write to fiction writers begin with the sentence, "I enjoyed your story, but you are writing about the present, not the future."

What does this mean for sf in general? It means that a lot of our readers are going outside the genre to find their future fix. When a commercial can excite my imagination more than a well-written story, I think something is wrong. I want sf writers to imagine the future better than we already are. Very few writers are tackling the biological developments or the applications of fuzzy logic on the future. Even fewer are looking at the social implications of rapidity of technological change. Just the other day, my husband and I were talking about all the jobs that exist now that didn't exist ten years ago — as we were watching a college student at Kinkos take a 3.5" floppy disk, stick it into one side of a machine, and receive a bound booklet from the other side.

K. Eric Drexler mentioned the change in sf at April's Nebula Awards banquet and angered a number of sf writers who claimed that he was telling us how to do our jobs. He was. And with good reason. While a handful of sf professionals have moved to the garden of the future, most of the tillers are turning the soil in a played-out field.

What does it mean to have a world with no beer? And how would the world have been different if newscasters could have broadcast live images from the Normandy Beach? And why does the fact that Ted

(Continued on page 36)

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Bradley Denton's "The Territory," the cover story for our July 1992 issue, was a finalist for the Nebula, Hugo and World Fantasy awards. St. Martin's Press published his most recent novel, Blackburn, *to great critical acclaim. He is currently at work on a new novel called* Lunatics.

Brad is one of a cadre of writers who live in and near Austin, Texas. He writes, "'We Love Lydia Love' evolved from my observation that people tend to indulge in the same kinds of self-destructive behaviors and relationships over and over again — to the extent that they sometimes can't function if they don't *indulge in those behaviors or relationships. That observation, combined with some furtive glimpses into the back alleys of the Austin music scene, led to the story."*

We Love Lydia Love

By Bradley Denton

SHE KNOWS ME, AND SHE'S happy, and she's not asking how or why. She's clutching me so tight that I can't keep my balance, and my shoulder collides with the open door. The door is heavy, dark wood with a circular stained-glass eye set into it. The eye, as blue as the spring sky, is staring at me as if it knows I'm a fraud.

From down the hill comes the sound of the car that brought me, winding its way back through the live oaks and cedars to Texas 27. Daniels didn't even stay long enough to say hello to his number-one recording artist. He said he'd leave the greetings up to me and the Christopher chip.

Stroke her neck. She likes that.

Yes. She's burying her face in my shoulder, biting, crying. Her skin is warm, and she tastes salty. She says something, but her mouth is full of my shirt. Her hair smells of cinnamon.

"Lydia," I say. My voice isn't exactly like Christopher's, but CCA has fixed me so that it's close enough. She shouldn't notice, but if she does, I'm

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to say that the plane crash injured my throat. "I tried to get a message to you, but the village was cut off, and I was burned, and my leg was broken —"

Not so much. We're the stoic type.

The whisper sounds like it's coming from my back teeth. I've been listening to it for two weeks, but that wasn't long enough for me to get used to it. I still flinch. I told Daniels that I needed more time, but he said Lydia would be so glad to see me that she wouldn't notice any tics or twitches. And by the time she settles back into a routine life with me — with Christopher — I'll be so used to the chip that it'll be as if it's the voice of my own conscience. So says Daniels. I'm not convinced, but I'll do my best. Not just for my sake, but for Lydia's. She needs to finish her affair with Christopher so she can move on. The world is waiting for her new songs.

And as a bonus, they'll get mine. Willie Todd's, I mean. Not Christopher Jennings'. Christopher Jennings is dead.

You are Christopher.

Right. I know.

She's looking at our eyes. She thinks we're distracted, and she wants our attention. Her lips are moist. Kiss her.

You bet. I'll concentrate on being Christopher.

Being Christopher means that Lydia and I have been apart for ten months. She has thought me dead, but here I am. She kisses me hard enough to make my mouth hurt. Her face is wet from crying, and she breathes in sobs. The videos make her look seven feet tall, but she's no more than five-four. Otherwise, she is as she appears on the tube. Her hair is long, thick, and red. Her eyes are green. Her skin is the color of ivory. Her lips are so full that she always seems to be pouting. I would think she was beautiful even if I hadn't admired her for so long.

I meaning me. Willie.

You are Christopher.

To Lydia I'll be Christopher. But to myself I can be Willie.

You are Christopher.

"I didn't believe it when Daniels called," Lydia says. She's still sobbing. "I thought he was mindfucking me like he usually does."

Say "That son of a bitch." We hate Danny Daniels.

"That son of a bitch." It seems ungrateful, considering that Daniels has just now returned us to her.

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She's trembling. Hold her tighter.

A moment ago she was crushing me, but now she seems so fragile that I'm afraid I'll hurt her. It's as if she's two different women.

And why not? I'm two different men.

Carry her to the bedroom. When she gets all soft and girly like this, she wants us to take charge. You'll know when she's tired of it.

She weighs nothing. I carry her into the big limestone house, leaving the June heat for cool air that makes me shiver. When I kick the door shut I see that the stained-glass eye is staring at me on this side too. I turn away from it and go through the tiled foyer into the huge front room with the twenty-foot ceiling, the picture windows, the fireplace, the expensive AV components, and the plush couches.

No. Not in here. When she was a child, she went to her bedroom to feel safe. So take her to the bedroom. It's down the long hall, third door on the right.

I know where it is, and I've already changed direction. But the chip's yammering makes me stumble, and Lydia's head bumps against the wall. She yelps.

"Jesus, I'm sorry," I say, and think of an excuse. "My leg's still not right."

"I know," Lydia says. "I know they hurt you."

Who are "they," I wonder? There was a plane crash, and — in this new version of Christopher's life — a village. A war was being fought in the ice and snow around the village, but all of my injuries were from the crash. The villagers did their best for me, but there was no way to get me out until I'd healed, and no communication with the rest of the world. The soldiers had cut the telecom lines and confiscated the radios, but had then become too busy fighting each other to do anything more to the village. So if the soldiers didn't hurt me, and the villagers didn't hurt me, who are "they"?

There is a "they" in Willie's story, but while what they did to me was painful, they did it with my consent. Getting my album recorded and released is worth some pain. It's also worth being Christopher for a while. And it's for damn sure worth having Lydia Love in my arms.

On the bed. Pin her wrists over her head.

That seems a little rough for a tender homecoming, but I remember that the Christopher chip is my conscience. I let my conscience be my guide.

I still worry that she'll know I'm not him, but it turns out all right. If

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there's a difference between the new Christopher and the old one, she doesn't seem to be aware of it. The chip tells me a few things that she likes, but most of the time it's silent. I guess that at some point, sex takes control away from its participants — even from Lydia Love and a computer chip — and instructions aren't necessary.

She's sweet.

And here I am deceiving her.

But this pang is undeserved. In any respect that matters to Lydia, I *am* Christopher. I will live with her, recharge her soul, and give her what she needs before she sends me away. And then, at last, she'll rise again from the ashes of her life to resume her work. Willie can be proud of that.

You are Christopher.

Lydia and I have spent most of the past six days in bed. It's been a repeating cycle: Tears, sex, a little sleep, more sex, and food. Then back to the tears. According to what Daniels and the Christopher chip have told me, everything with Lydia goes in cycles.

But this particular cycle has to be interrupted, because we've run out of food. Despite her huge house, Lydia has no hired help; and since no one will deliver groceries this far out in the Hill Country, one or both of us will have to make a trip to Kerrville. But Lydia isn't supposed to leave the estate alone without calling CCA-Austin for a bodyguard...and if she were to go out with me, the hassle from the videorazzi would be even worse than usual. The headlines would be something like "Lydia Performs Satanic Ritual to Bring Boy-Toy Back from Beyond the Grave." I don't think she can handle that just yet.

But if I slip out by myself, I tell her, I'll be inconspicuous. Christopher Jennings is an ordinary guy. Put him in his old jeans and pickup truck, and no one would suspect that he's the man living with Lydia Love. I have the jeans, and the pickup's still in Lydia's garage. So I can hit the Kerrville H.E.B. supermarket and be back before the sweat from our last round of lovemaking has dried. It makes perfect sense.

But Lydia shoves me away and gets out of bed. She stands over me wild-eyed, her neck and arm muscles popped out hard as marble.

"You just got back, and now you want to leave?" Her voice is like the cry of a hawk. She is enraged, and I'm stunned. This has

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come on like storm clouds on fast-forward.

She's waiting for an answer, so I listen for a prompt from the Christopher chip. But there isn't one.

"Just for groceries," I say. My voice is limp.

Lydia spins away. She goes to her mahogany dresser, pulls it out from the wall, and shoves it over. The crash makes me jump. Then she flings a crystal vase against the wall. Her hair whips like fire in a tornado. All the while she rants, "I thought you were dead, and you're going out to die again. I thought you were dead, and you're going out to die again. I thought —"

I start up from the bed. I want to grab her and hold her before she hurts herself. She's naked, and there are slivers of crystal sticking up from the thick gray carpet.

Stay put. We never try to stop her.

But she already has a cut on her arm. It's small, but there's some blood —

She always quits before she does serious damage. So let her throw her tantrum. It's a turn-on for her. She expects it to have the same effect on us.

Lydia looks down and sees herself in the dresser mirror on the floor. She screams and stamps her feet on it. The mirror doesn't crack, but she's still stamping, and when it breaks she'll gash her feet. I have to stop her.

No.

This isn't right. But if Christopher would let her rage, then I must do likewise if I want her to believe I'm him. Even now, as she attacks the mirror, she's looking at me with suspicion inside her fury.

She expects arousal.

Having trouble getting aroused in the presence of a naked Lydia Love was not a problem I anticipated.

She stops screaming and stamping as if a switch in her brain has been flipped to OFF. The mirror has cracked, but it hasn't cut her feet. She leaves it and comes toward me, moving with tentative steps, avoiding the broken pieces of crystal. Except for the nick on her arm, she seems to be all right. The rage has drained from her eyes, and what's left is a puzzled fear.

"Christopher?" she says. Her voice quavers. Her ribs strain against her skin as she breathes.

She is looking at my crotch.

What did I tell you!

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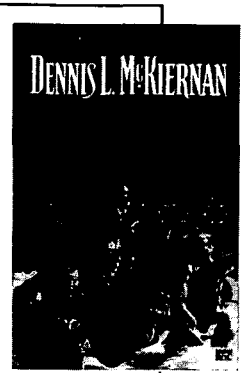

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This was the one area I hoped the surgeons wouldn't touch, and to my relief they decided that it was close enough as it was. Christopher had an average body with average parts, and so do I. So they didn't change much besides my face and voice.

But the surgeons couldn't see me with Lydia's eyes. And now she's looking close for the first time. She's realizing that I'm someone else.

No. She's only confused because we're not excited.

Lydia stops at the foot of the bed and shifts her weight from one hip to the other. Her tangled hair is draped over her left shoulder. Her lips are even more swollen than usual.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

Oh. Well.

Maybe I'm more like Christopher than I thought.

You are Christopher.

Shut up. I can do this myself now. Whoever I am.

LATER I take Christopher's beat-up white Chevy pickup truck and head for the H.E.B. in Kerrville. Lydia worries over me as I leave the house, but she doesn't pitch another fit. She gives me a cash card with ten thousand bucks on it, kisses me, and tells me to come home safe, goddamn it. As I let the truck coast down the switchbacked driveway, I glance into the rearview mirror and see that both Lydia and the stained-glass eye are watching me. Then the trees obscure them, but I know they're still there.

As I reach Texas 27, a guy in a lawn chair under the trees on the far side of the highway points a camcorder at me. He's probably only a tabloid 'razzi, but I wait until the driveway's automatic gate closes behind me before I turn toward Kerrville. After all, Lydia Love has more than her share of obsessive fans. That hasn't changed even though she hasn't recorded and has hardly performed in the three years since Christopher Jennings came into her life. But I guess her fans know as well as I do that the phoenix will rise again.

And it will rise thanks to me. To Willie.

You are Christopher.

Thanks to both of us, then.

The pickup doesn't have air-conditioning, which says something about Christopher's economic situation before he met Lydia. I roll down both

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windows and let the hot breeze blast me as I follow the twisting highway eastward alongside the Guadalupe River. Kerrville, a small town with a big reputation, is just a few miles away.

Its big reputation is the result of its annual folk-music festival, but I stopped going to the festival two years ago. It seemed as if almost everyone was using amplifiers and distortion, trying to be Lydia Love. She's my favorite singer too, but some of these kids can't get it through their heads that if Lydia didn't make it big by trying to look and sound like someone else, they shouldn't try to look and sound like someone else either.

Like I've got room to talk. It's only now that I *do* look and sound like someone else that I have a shot at a future in the music business.

The supermarket's the first thing on my left as I come into town. After parking the truck, I find a pay phone on the store's outside wall, run the cash card through it, and punch up Danny Daniels' number in Dallas. Daniels is an L.A. boy, but he says he'll be working at CCA-Dallas until he can get a new Lydia Love album in the can. If he wants to stay close to her, he'd do better to relocate to CCA-Austin — but when I pointed that out, he gave a theatrical shudder and said, "Hippies." I guess Dallas is closer to being his kind of scene.

He comes on the line before it rings. "Yo, Christopher," he says. "Except for that minor bout of impotence this morning, you're doing peachy-keen. Keep it up. And I mean that."

Unlike the original Christopher, I know that I'm being observed while I'm with Lydia. But there ought to be limits.

"You don't have to watch us sc ew," I say. "Sex is just sex. It's the other stuff that'll break us up."

"But sex is part of 'the other stuff,' Chris," Daniels says. "So just pretend you're alone with her. Besides, if everything continues going peachy-keen, I'm the only one who'll see it. And it's not like I'm enjoying it."

How could anyone not enjoy seeing Lydia Love naked? I wonder.

Or is that Christopher?

You are Christopher.

Not when I'm on the phone with Danny Daniels.

You are Christopher.

Let me think.

You are Christopher.

"The chip's talking too much," I tell Daniels. "It's getting in my face, and

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Lydia's going to notice that something's not right."

Daniels sighs. "We put everything we know about the Christopher-Lydia relationship into that chip, so of course it's gonna have a lot to say. I've already told you, just think of it as your conscience."

"My conscience doesn't speak from my back teeth."

"It does now," Daniels says. "But it won't last long. The shrinks say that Lydia would have given Christopher the heave-ho in another six weeks if he hadn't been killed, and now they tell me that she won't stay with the resurrected version for more than another three months. Then you'll be out on your butt, she'll do her thing, and everybody'll be happy. Including Willie Todd."

What about me?

You'll be happy too, because I'm you. Isn't that what you keep telling me? Now back off. Daniels sounds like he might be pissed off, and I don't want him pissed off. Not at me, anyway.

Why? You scared of him?

No. But I know where my bread's buttered.

"Thanks, Danny," I say. "We just had a bad morning, that's all. Sorry I griped."

The phone is voice-only, but I can sense his grin. "No problem. You need a pep talk, I'm your guy. And if you feel like chewing my ass, that's cool too. After all, you're Christopher now, and Christopher once told me that he wanted to rip off my head and shit down my neck."

"Why'd he — I mean why'd I —"

We.

" — do that?"

"Because I told him he was fucking up Lydia's creative process," Daniels says. "Which he was. But I shouldn't have told him so. She was going to dump you anyway."

Or maybe I would have dumped her. Smug asshole never considers that.

I remember Lydia's rage this morning. No matter how beautiful and talented she is, that sort of thing can wear a man down. "I think she might be about half-crazy," I say.

Daniels laughs. "The bitch is a genius. What do you expect?"

Well, I guess I expect her to dump me, have her usual creative burst, and for the world to be in my debt. And for my first album, *Willie Todd*, to be

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released on datacard, digital audio tape, and compact disc.

You are Christopher.

Yeah, yeah.

"Guess that's all, Danny," I say. "Just figured I should check in."

Why? He's watching us all the time anyway.

"Glad you did, Chris," Daniels says, and the line goes dead.

I head into the ice-cold store, and now that I'm off the phone, I have a moment in which all of this — my new voice, my new face, my new name, my place in the bed of Lydia Love — seems like a lunatic scam that can't work and can't be justified.

But CCA has the psychological profiles, the gizmos, and the money, so CCA knows best. If it makes sense to them, it makes sense to me too. And what makes sense to CCA is that Lydia Love's creative process has followed a repeating cycle for the past eleven years:

At seventeen, after graduating from high school in Lubbock, Lydia had a violent breakup with her first serious boyfriend, a skate-punk Nintendo freak. Immediately following that breakup, she went without sleep for six days, writing songs and playing guitar until her fingers bled. Then she slept for three days. When she awoke she drained her mother's savings account, hopped a bus to Austin, and bought twelve hours of studio time. She mailed a digital tape of the results to Creative Communications of America and went to bed with the engineer who'd recorded it.

The recording engineer became her manager, and he lasted in both his personal and professional capacities for a little over a year — long enough for Lydia to start gigging, to land a contract with CCA, and to buy a house in a rich Austin suburb. Then her new neighbors were awakened one night by the sounds of screaming and breaking glass, and some of them saw the manager/boyfriend running down the street, naked except for a bandanna. The sound of breaking glass stopped then, but the screaming continued, accompanied by electric guitar.

The next day, Lydia's debut album, *First Love*, was released at a party held in the special-events arena on the University of Texas campus. The party was supposed to include a concert, but Lydia didn't show up. She was in the throes of her second creative burst.

The music that emanated from her house over the next three weeks was loud, distorted, disruptive, and Just Not Done in that suburb. The neighbors

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called the cops every night, and at the end of Lydia's songwriting frenzy, one of the cops moved in with her.

The cop suggested that Lydia take the advance money for her second album and build a home and studio out in the Hill Country west of the city, where she could crank her amplifiers as high as she liked. He supervised the construction while Lydia toured for a year, and when she came home they went inside together and stayed there for a year and a half. Lydia's career might have ended then had it not been for the fact that both her tour and her second album had grossed more money than the rest of CCA's acts combined. So between CCA, the tabloid papers and TV shows ("Lydia Love Pregnant with Elvis's Siamese Twins"), and the continuing popularity of her music, Lydia's name and image remained in the public eye even if Lydia didn't.

Then the ex-cop showed up at an emergency room in Kerrville with a few pellets of birdshot in his buttocks, and the county sheriff found the alleged shooter making loud noises in her basement studio. CCA rejoiced, and the third album sold even better than the first two.

Lydia's next boyfriend lasted almost as long as the ex-cop had. He was your basic Texas bubba (Lydia seems to go for us common-man types), and he and Lydia settled into a happy routine that could have ruined her. But then he went to a rodeo and was seduced by two barrel racers. The photos and videos hit the stands and the tube before the bubba even got out of bed. When he tried to go back to Lydia's, he found the driveway blocked by a pile of his possessions. They were on fire.

Creative Burst Number Four followed, and that resulted in the twenty-three songs of *Love in Flames*, my favorite album by anybody, ever. Lydia followed that with a world tour that took two years of her life and made CCA enough money to buy Canada, if they'd wanted it. And it was while Lydia was on that tour, Daniels says, that CCA bugged her house. The corporation wanted to be sure that they could send help fast if she hurt herself in one of her rages.

When Lydia came home from the tour, she discovered that a hailstorm had beaten up her roof. She hired an Austin company to repair it, and Christopher Jennings, a twenty-four-year-old laborer and semi-professional guitarist, was on the crew. When the job was finished and the rest of the crew went back to the city, he stayed.

Christopher and Lydia had been together for almost eighteen months when Lydia agreed to do a free concert in India. They went together, but

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Christopher took a side trip to Nepal. On the way back to New Delhi, his plane detoured to avoid a storm, hit a worse one, and went down in a mountainous wasteland claimed by both India and Pakistan. The mountains, frequent storms, and constant skirmishes between the opposing armies made the area inaccessible, and all aboard the airplane were presumed dead.

Lydia remained in India for two months before coming back to Texas, and then CCA rubbed their collective hands. They figured that with Christopher now a corpse on a mountainside, they'd soon have more Lydia Love songs to sell to the world.

But six more months passed, and the studio in Lydia's basement remained silent. Death and grief couldn't substitute for betrayal and anger. CCA, and the world, had lost her.

Then one night a scruffy day laborer and aspiring singer-songwriter named Willie Todd was playing acoustic guitar for tips in a South Austin bar, and a man wearing a leather necktie approached him.

"Son," the necktied man said, "my name is Danny Daniels, and I sign new artists for CCA. How would you like to record your songs for us?"

To a guy who grew up in a Fort Worth trailer park with six brothers and sisters, no father, and no money, Daniels looked and sounded like Jesus Christ Himself. I'd been trying to break into the money strata of the Austin music scene for five years, and I was still lugging junkyard scrap by day and playing for tips at night. But with just a few words from Danny Daniels, all of that was over. He took me into a studio and paid for my demo, then flew me to Los Angeles to meet some producers.

It was only then that I found out what I'd have to do before CCA would give Willie Todd his shot. And although it sounded weird, I was willing. I still am. As Daniels explained, this thing should have no down side. After the breakup, I get my old face and voice back, Lydia's muse gets busy again, and CCA releases great albums from both of us.

So here I am in the Kerrville H.E.B., buying tortillas and rice for Lydia Love, the biggest Texas rock 'n' roll star since Buddy Holly...and for her most recent boyfriend, a dead man named Christopher.

You are Christopher.

But I'm not dead. Dead men don't buy groceries.

Dead men don't sleep with Lydia Love.

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It's my seventh week with Lydia, and something I didn't expect is happening. As I've settled back into life with her, I've begun to see her as something other than the singer, the sex symbol, the video goddess: I have begun to see her as a dull pain in the ass.

Her rage before my first grocery run hasn't repeated itself, and I wish that it would. She's gone zombie on me. Sometimes when she's lying on the floor with a bowl of bean dip on her stomach, watching the tube through half-closed eyes, I wonder if she was the one who decided to end her previous relationships. I wonder if maybe one or two of the men made the decision themselves.

Why do you think I took that side trip to Nepal?

She has a gym full of exercise equipment, but she hasn't gone in there since I've come back. So I've been working out by myself to take the edge off my frustration, and I'm heading there now while she watches a tape of a lousy old movie called *A Star Is Born.* A run on the treadmill sounds appropriate.

Even the sex has started going downhill.

We could look elsewhere. I was starting to, before the plane crash.

No. Forget I said anything. Lydia's just moody; that's part of what makes her who she is. It would be stupid of me to mess up a good thing.

Isn't that what you're supposed to be doing?

I don't know. Are we talking about Willie or Christopher? According to CCA, Willie is here to give Lydia someone to break up with, but Christopher ought to be here because he cares about her. So which one am I?

You are Christopher.

All right, then. We can't just let things go on like this, so let's try something. Lydia hasn't picked up a guitar since I came back, and neither have I. Maybe if she and I played together —

She's too critical of other guitar players. We don't like being humiliated.

In front of whom?

Ourselves. And the people behind the walls.

But CCA's already agreed to put out my album. They already know I'm good. What difference will it make if Lydia and I play a few tunes together?

CCA is putting out an album by Willie Todd. You are Christopher.

I don't care.

So I hop off the treadmill, and as I start to leave the gym, Lydia appears in the doorway. She's wearing the same gray sweats she wore yesterday and

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the day before. Her skin is blotchy, and she looks strung out. It occurs to me that she might be taking drugs.

Of course she is. When things don't go her way, she takes something. Or breaks something.

"I'm going to kill myself," Lydia says. Her voice is a monotone.

Oh shit.

Don't worry. This is old news. She craves drama, and if she doesn't get it, she invents it. Ignore her.

She's threatening suicide. I'm not going to ignore that.

I would.

Well, Willie wouldn't.

Sure he would. CCA wouldn't pick a new Christopher who didn't have the same basic character traits as the old Christopher.

Shut up. I've got to concentrate on Lydia.

But she's already disappeared from the doorway. I zoned out, and she's gone to kill herself.

No, she's gone to eat or get wasted. Or both.

Fuck off. Just fuck off.

That's no way to talk to yourself.

I run down the hallway, yelling for her. She's not in any of the bedrooms, the kitchen, the dining room, the front room, or the garage. Not out on the deck or in the back yard. But she could be hidden among the trees, hanging herself. She could already be dead, and it would be me that killed her. Just because I wanted a break, just because I made a deal with CCA, just because I flew off and died on a mountainside, leaving her alone and unable to write or sing.

And at that thought I know where she is. She's where her music has lain as if dead all these months. She's gone to join it.

So I find her down in the studio, sitting cross-legged on the floor. She's plinking on a Guild acoustic, but the notes are random. She's staring at the carpet, paying no attention to what she's playing. I sit down facing her.

She looks like a toad.

No, she's beautiful. Look at her fingers. They're slender, but strong. Dangerous. Can't you see that?

Sure. But seeing it isn't enough.

She's still alive. That's enough for me.

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"I don't think you should kill yourself," I tell her. The gray egg-crate foam on the walls and ceiling makes my voice sound flat and unconvincing.

"Why not?" she asks without looking at me. Her hair is tied back, but some of it has come loose and is hanging against her cheek, curling up to touch her nose. I'm close enough to smell the sweat on her neck, and I want to kiss it away.

If you touch her now, she'll go ballistic.

"Why not?" Lydia asks again.

"Because you wouldn't like being dead," I say. "It's boring."

"So's being alive."

She has a point there.

Quiet. "It doesn't have to be."

Lydia's shoulders hunch, as if she's trying to shrink into herself. "Yes, it does," she says. "Life and death are really the same thing, except that life is more work."

She's still plinking on the Guild, but I notice that the notes aren't random anymore. They're starting to punctuate and echo her words. They sound familiar.

It's the progression for "Love in Flames," but she's playing it a lot bluesier than on the album.

It sounds good, though. It gives me an idea.

"I think you should do some gigs," I say.

Lydia looks up at me now. Her eyes are like stones. "I don't have anything new."

And except for the India concert, she's always refused to perform unless she has new material.

Well, there's a first time for everything. "So play your old stuff," I say, "only do something different with it, like you are now. Play it like it was the blues. See if it gets your juices flowing —"

I'm just able to duck out of the way as she swings the Guild at my head. Then she stands up and smashes the guitar against the floor over and over again.

I could have told you that she doesn't like being given advice.

So why didn't you?

Because I thought it was good advice.

Thanks, Christopher.

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You are Christopher.

Whatever.

When the guitar is little more than splinters and strings, Lydia flings the neck away and glares down at me.

"I'll call Danny Daniels and have him schedule some dates," she says. "Small clubs, I think. And then I'm going to bed. See you there." She goes out, and the studio's padded steel door swings shut behind her with a solid click.

Now you've done it. When this doesn't work out, it'll be our fault. She likes it when it's our fault.

I thought you said it was good advice.

But good advice isn't enough. Nothing is. Not for Lydia Love.

Apparently not for you either, Christopher.

You are Christopher.

WE'RE AT a blues club on Guadalupe Street in Austin on a Wednesday night, and it's jam-packed even though there's been no advertising. Word spreads fast. I'm in the backstage lounge with Lydia, and it's jam-packed back here too. The cigarette smoke is thick. We're sitting on the old vinyl couch under the Muddy Waters poster, and I'm trying not to be afraid of being crushed by the mob. CCA has sent a dozen beefy dudes to provide security, and I can tell that they're itching for someone to try something.

But Lydia, dressed in faded jeans and a black T-shirt, doesn't seem to be aware that anyone else is in the room. She's picking away on a pale green Telecaster, eyes focused on the frets. The guitar isn't plugged in, so in all of this cacophony she can't possibly hear what she's playing. But she plays anyway. She hears it in her head.

A spot between my eyes gets hot, as if a laser-beam gunsight has focused on me, and I look across the room and see Danny Daniels in the doorway. He's giving me a glare like the Wicked Witch gave Dorothy. When he jerks his head backward, I know it's a signal to me to get over there.

He's got our career in his pocket. Better see what he wants.

Why? You scared of him?

Up yours.

That's no way to talk to yourself.

I lean close to Lydia and yell that I'm going to the john. She nods but

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doesn't look up. Her music matters to her again, so screw CCA and their shrinks.

I squeeze through the throng to Daniels, and he yanks me toward the fire exit. My new black-and-white cowboy hat gets knocked askew.

Out in the alley behind the club, I pull away and straighten my hat. "You grab some guys like that," I say, "and you'd get your ass kicked."

Daniels' face is pale in the white glow of the mercury lamp on the back wall. "You haven't been doing your job," he says.

I take a deep breath of the humid night air. "How do you figure?"

As if we didn't know.

I'll handle this. "I'm supposed to be Lydia Love's boyfriend, right? Well, that's what I'm doing."

Daniels tugs at his leather necktie. "You're supposed to behave as Christopher would behave so that she'll go berserk and kick you out. But you're obviously ignoring the Christopher chip's instructions."

I can't help chuckling. "The chip hasn't been handing out many instructions lately. It's been making comments, but not giving orders. So I must be behaving as Christopher would. After all, I'm him, right?"

Daniels shakes his balding head. "Not according to CCA's psychs. Christopher wouldn't reason with Lydia when she goes wacko. He gave up on reasoning with her a long time ago."

Never really tried.

Guess you should have.

Guess so.

"If the chip's lying down on the job," I say, "that's not my fault. I'm holding up my end of the contract."

Daniels grins.

Watch out when the son of a bitch does that.

"Our contract," Daniels says, "is with Willie Todd. But if you were Willie, you'd be behaving more like Christopher even without the chip. That's why we picked Willie in the first place. You, however, seem to be a third party with whom CCA has no arrangement whatsoever." He sighs. "And if Willie has disappeared, there's no point in releasing his album."

This is bullshit.

"This is bullshit."

Daniels shrugs. "Maybe so, Willie-Chris, Chris-Willie, or whoever you

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are. But it's legal bullshit, the most potent kind."

My back teeth are aching. "So if I have to be Willie for you to honor his contract," I say, "how can I be Christopher?"

You can beat his ugly face into sausage, that's how.

"Chris and Willie are interchangeable," Daniels says. "Both are working-class dullards who think they deserve better because they know a few chords. Any superficial differences can be wiped out by the chip. So I say again: Listen to the chip as if it were your conscience."

If I listened to the chip, Danny, you'd have blood running out your nose.

If he was lucky.

"I know you're getting attached to Lydia," Daniels continues, his tone now one of false sympathy, "but sooner or later she'll dump you. That's just what she does. It wasn't until Christopher's death that we realized she trashes her boyfriends for inspiration, but then it became obvious. So we brought Christopher back to life so she could get on with it. The only variable is how long it takes, and that's up to you. If you drag things out until CCA loses patience, Willie's songs will never be heard. And he won't get his own face back, either, because we won't throw good money after bad. He might not even be able to regain his legal identity. He'll have lost his very existence."

There are worse things.

"Willie's existence wasn't much to begin with," I say.

Daniels puts a hand on my shoulder, and I resist the urge to break his fingers. "Something is always better than nothing, Christopher. And if you go on the way you've been going, nothing is what you'll be."

Big deal.

"So what do you want me to do?" I ask.

"Only what the chip and I tell you," Daniels says. "If you don't like my conscience metaphor, then think of CCA, me, and the chip as the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Mess with any one of us, and you get slapped down with heavenly wrath. Mess with all of us, and you go straight to hell." He gestures at the club's back wall. "See, this kind of crap can't continue. Neither Lydia nor CCA makes real money from a gig like this. So your current directive from the Son of God is as follows: Go and spend thee the night in a motel. You still have that cash card?"

"Yeah, but — "

Daniels gives me a shove. "You, whoever you are, talked her into doing

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this gig. So she'll expect you to be here for it. But you won't be. So saith the Son."

No. We can't leave now. Not with Lydia about to go on stage for the first time since India. She'd hate me. Us.

Yeah. But that might be what she wants. She thrives on being treated like dirt. That's why she goes for guys like us. But we've been too nice lately, and it's screwed her up.

That's sick.

That's Lydia.

"All right," I tell Daniels. "I'm going. But I don't like it."

Daniels grins again. "Shit, neither do I. But it's for her own good, and yours too. If you weren't fucked in the head right now, you'd know that."

Come on. Let's get out of here.

I turn away from Daniels and walk off down the dark alley, abandoning Lydia to herself. My boots crunch on the broken asphalt. A bat flies past my — our — face, coming so close that we feel a puff of air from its wings.

Is Daniels right? Am I fucked in the head?

In the soul, Christopher. In the soul.

The stained-glass eye has become an open mouth surrounded by jagged teeth. Blue shards cover the front step, and they make snapping sounds as I come up to the door. I smell something burning. The stereo in the front room is blaring an old thrash-metal number about a murder-suicide. My back teeth begin to ache again.

As I cross the foyer into the front room, I see what Lydia has done. The picture windows have been broken, and the walls are pockmarked with holes. Some of the holes seem to be the results of shotgun blasts, and some have been punched with free-weight bars from the gym. The bars are still sticking out of some of these.

All of the furniture has been torn to pieces. The only things left intact are the AV components, which are stacked on the floor in front of the fireplace. But the cabinet that housed them is with everything else from the room — with everything else from the entire house, I think. Everything has been broken, shredded, crumpled, melted, or twisted, and then piled in the center of the room. A misshapen pyramid reaches three-quarters of the way up to the ceiling.

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Lydia, wearing the jeans and T-shirt from last night's gig, is sitting atop the pyramid and using a fireplace-lighter to burn holes into white cloth that used to be drapes. She doesn't notice me until I cross the room and turn off the stereo.

"Christopher," she says, glancing at me with a distracted expression. "You're back." Her voice is thick. I wonder if she's taken pills.

No. Her eyes are clear. She knows what she's doing. If the shotgun's handy, she might kill us now.

"I'm sorry I left last night," I say, trying to think of a lie to explain myself. "Daniels told me it was my fault that you were playing a joint instead of an arena, and I was afraid that if I stuck around I was gonna pop him. So I went for a walk, but when I got back, you and the truck were gone. I tried to call, but my card wouldn't work. And I couldn't find a cab that would bring me out here at night. So I stayed in a motel."

Too much. She won't buy it.

"I thought your card didn't work," Lydia says.

We're meat.

Not if you back off and let me deal with this.

"It didn't work in the phone," I say. "But the motel took it."

"So why didn't you call from the motel?"

Told you.

Piss on it, then. I'm going to tell her the truth, including who I am.

Who's that?

"Don't answer," Lydia says. "Just turn on the VCR and watch the monitor."

So I do as she says. The monitor flashes on as the tape starts, and there I am, doing it with a brown-haired girl I've never seen before.

Yee-oww. Where was I when this was going on?

This never went on. I know that's the motel room we stayed in last night, because I recognize the bent corner on the picture frame over the bed. But I don't know that girl. So that can't be me.

Looks like us.

So it must be you. It's Christopher before the crash.

You are Christopher.

Yeah, but I'm Christopher after the crash.

Check out the hat on the floor. We were wearing it last night. We're

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wearing it right now. And it didn't belong to Christopher before the crash. It's brand new.

But I don't have a chance to figure out what that means, because Lydia has succeeded in setting the white drapery on fire. She waves it like a flag, bringing its flames close to her hair, so I move to yank it away from her. But she tosses it away before I can reach for it, and it snags on a chair leg sticking out of the pyramid. To my relief, the flames start to die down.

Lydia is staring at me now. "Tell me what happened last night," she says. "Tell me where you found that girl while I was sweating in front of all those people. Tell me whether you started with her while I was singing, or whether you waited until you knew I'd be on my way home. Tell me whether she can suck the chrome off a trailer hitch." She points the fireplace-lighter at me. "Tell me the truth, Christopher."

I look at the video monitor. The brown-haired girl and I are still going at it. The clothes on the floor are the ones I'm wearing now. The stamp on my left hand is the one that was put on at the club last night, the one that's still here on my skin. But that man is not me. I didn't do those things. We're watching an imaginary past with false faces and artificial voices.

Whoa. Sounds familiar.

Danny Daniels. CCA.

"Where'd the tape come from?" I ask, turning back toward Lydia. But if there's an answer I don't hear it, because the fire, instead of dying, has jumped to some paper and plastic in the pyramid. I can still smother it with the drapery if I hurry.

But Lydia jumps down partway and jabs her lighter at my face, stopping me. The yellow flame at the end of the barrel is two inches from my nose. The brim of my hat scorches.

"Tell me the truth," Lydia says.

A wisp of black smoke rises to the ceiling.

All right, then. The truth. Or as close as I can get.

"I've never seen that girl before," I say. "Daniels faked that tape to split us up."

Just doing his job.

Right. This is the way things are supposed to be, and I'm supposed to help them along.

But I don't want to anymore, and I don't care if it costs me my album or

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my face or my name. Looking at her now, I realize that I only care about one thing: I love Lydia Love.

I know. So do I. But loving her isn't enough.

Lydia's upper lip pulls back from her teeth. "Why should Danny care who I'm with? He doesn't have a thing for me." The flame waves before my eyes.

"No," I say, "but CCA does."

"What — " Lydia begins, and then a deafening buzz buries her words.

It's the smoke alarm. The pyramid shudders with the sound, and Lydia loses her balance and pitches forward. My hat gets knocked off, and Lydia's flame burns across my cheek as I catch her and fall backward. We hit the floor as pieces of the pyramid crash down around us.

The video monitor is right before our eyes. The brown-haired girl's lips are forming a name over and over again.

Christopher, she says. Christopher, Christopher.

But that's not my name.

No. You are Willie.

But we are Christopher.

Sprinkler nozzles pop out of the ceiling hissing and begin drenching us. The fireplace-lighter sputters out, and Lydia drops it. Then she pushes away from us, snatches up a pump shotgun from behind the AV components, and runs from the room. The fire in the pyramid dies, but the alarm keeps buzzing and the sprinklers keep spraying.

We struggle up and go after her. The door to the studio slams shut as we come down the stairs. A glimpse before it closes shows us that the sprinklers aren't on in there. We try the door but it won't open, so we pound on it and try to shout through the noise of the alarm. The door isn't padded on this side, and the steel is cold and hard. We tell Lydia our names and the truth of why we put on this face and came back to her. We tell her about CCA wanting to get its money's worth, about the surgery and the chip, about everything we can think of. The burn on our cheek stings as the water hits it.

She wouldn't believe anything we said now. Even if she could hear us.

But we have to try. She has the shotgun. And last week she said she was going to kill herself —

The alarm stops, and we shout Lydia's name as loud as we can.

There are two quick explosions, and circular patterns of bumps appear in the door's metal skin. From the other side, Lydia's muffled voice tells us

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to go back to the dead where we belong.

Then comes the sound of an electric guitar, and of a scream fueled by betrayal and anger.

Lydia Love is writing songs again.

And we know what that means. It means that our name, or whether we even have a name, doesn't matter anymore.

We are —

Shut up. It doesn't matter.

No. We guess not.

We sit down to soak in the artificial rain.

ON THE DAY after our return to Austin, Danny Daniels called us at the motel and asked when we wanted to have the surgery to remove the chip and to return Willie's face and voice to their pre-Christopher states. We'd had a night to calm down, so we didn't accuse him of using the sex video to give our relationship with Lydia a shove over a cliff. Of course he had done it. But his job, and ours, was to get Lydia Love to start producing again. We had a contract, and all he did was help it along.

And he lived up to his end of the bargain. We got Willie's face and voice back, more or less, and the chip was removed from our jaw. The doctors made a point of showing it to us after the operation.

As if a conscience could be removed so easily.

Quiet. Willie can't shake hands, think, and listen to Christopher all at the same time.

So let Christopher take over the social duties. Crush a few knuckle-bones.

Deal.

Today our album, *Willie Todd,* has been released on datacard, DAT, and compact disc. Just in time for Christmas. And thanks to Daniels, three of its tracks are already in heavy rotation on the audio and video networks. He even arranged for this release party at the Austin Hyatt Regency with a whole shitload of CCA bigshots and performers in attendance.

We asked Daniels if one performer in particular would be here, and he winked. But we don't see her anywhere.

The son of a bitch can lie without opening his mouth.

Daniels has done a lot for us, but we still don't like him.

Wait. There she is, by the waterfall, talking to a couple of CCA execs.

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She might not want to see us.

Sure she will. We don't look like Christopher anymore.

There's a touch on our arm. It's Daniels. Our well-wishers melt away until we're alone with him beside the fake creek burbling through the atrium.

"Your hat's crooked, Willie," he says, giving us that alligator grin of his. "You want to make a good impression on her, don't you?"

"It's all right if I meet her?" we ask.

Daniels raises his eyebrows. "None of my business."

What a load. It's exactly his business.

"You've finished her sessions?" we ask.

He straightens his necktie. "Yup. Got the last four tracks in the can yesterday. She wants to call the album *Go Back to the Dead*, but we're trying to talk her into something more upbeat. My co-producers like *Once More With Love*, but I'm partial to *What Goes Around Comes Around*. We've gotta decide soon, because it has to be out by Valentine's Day."

"Valentine's Day?"

Cute.

"Yeah, her tour kicks off in New York on February 14," Daniels says. He nudges our shoulder. "How'd you like to be the opening act?"

Opening act. Right. You know what kind of act he wants us to be.

Should we refuse?

Like we could.

We turn away from Daniels and start toward her.

"Attaboy," Daniels says behind us.

The CCA honchos move away from her as we approach. Her hair is even longer now, and her skin is smooth and healthy. Her eyes are a bright green, like sunlight shining through emeralds.

"You're Willie Todd," she says, extending her right hand. "I'm Lydia Love. Congratulations on the album. It's good work."

Our fingers touch hers with a snap of electricity. We jump, then laugh.

"Danny Daniels played me some songs from your own new album," we say. "They sound okay too."

She smiles at the understatement. "Gee, thanks." She tilts her head, and her hair falls over one eye. "Did he mention that I'd like you to open for me on the tour? Your music makes you sound like a guy I could get along with."

For a while, maybe.

But a while is better than never. A while is all anyone ever has.

"Maybe we could talk about it after the party," we say.

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"Maybe we could," Lydia says.

And so the cycle comes back to its beginning. But now Lydia isn't the only one who can play the phoenix game.

Across the atrium, Daniels raises his glass to us.

Like the man said: What goes around comes around.

Or "Once more with Love."

So we might as well plan ahead. What name shall we go under next time?

One we can use for both of us. It'll avoid confusion.

If you want to avoid confusion, you're in love with the wrong woman, Christopher.

My name is Willie.

Whatever. She's looking at our eyes. Her lips are moist. Kiss her.

We let our conscience be our guide. ☙

(Editorial continued from page 10)

Koppel and some unknown advertising exec have thought these scenarios up bother me so much?

It bothers me because we in sf are abrogating our responsibility. We are failing to imagine possible futures as writers and as readers, we are satisfied with the comfortable ideas of those who formed our sf tastes instead of branching into new areas of the literature. I cringe when I hear a reader complain that an sf story (from any of the sf publications) explores biological and sociological change instead of "real hard sf," not realizing that many of the changes we face in our future happen to be in the areas of the "softer" sciences or even in the social sciences. Or when I hear a critic complain that stories deal too much with changes in people, not understanding that the adventures of the future might occur within our own bodies and in our own minds.

We, of course, should not abandon the rockets or the rayguns. Science fiction also has a place among the stars, and will always have strong heroes exploring new cultures. But we should not leave the visions of the near-future or the comparisons of the present with the past to newscasters and admen. We should celebrate the fact that sf has become part of the mainstream. We just shouldn't let the mainstream usurp our place as the culture's visionaries. ☙

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BOOKS

JOHN KESSEL

HARD WORK

The Ascent of Wonder, ed. David G. Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer, Tor, 1994, 992 pp., $35.00 cloth.

Rationalizing Genius, by John Huntington, Rutgers University Press, 1989, 216 pp., $15.00 trade paper.

Wildlife, by James Patrick Kelly, Tor Books, 1994, 300 pp. $21.95, cloth.

SINCE I'M pretty rapidly going to shoot off, as is my habit, into areas of pure opinion that will undoubtedly raise some hackles, let me get the consumer report part of this month's column out of the way.

The Ascent of Wonder is a huge anthology dedicated to the proposition that hard science fiction is the center of the field. According to editors David Hartwell and Kathryn Cramer, most of the commonplace backgrounds and situations of science fiction, even those that figure in the work of soft sf writers, originate in hard sf stories.

The anthology locates the beginnings of hard sf in the work of Poe, Verne, and Wells and maintains that it reached its apotheosis in the John W. Campbell era with Heinlein, Clarke, Asimov and Clement, when to write science fiction was essentially to write hard science fiction. The Campbell tradition persists most strongly today in writers like Larry Niven, Robert Forward, and Gregory Benford, but Hartwell and Cramer find a different sort of hard sf in the work of William Gibson, Richard Grant and others. Along the way they offer side trips into the ways writers not ordinarily associated with the Campbell tradition, like Philip K. Dick, Alfred Bester, J.G. Ballard, and Kate Wilhelm, fill the hard sf bill.

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This generous selection would be an asset to any collection and ought to be in every library. It offers examples of just about every way that science, scientists, and the underlying assumptions of science have ever appeared in our genre. You'll find classics here: Wells's "The Land Ironclads," Bob Shaw's "Light of Other Days," Clarke's "The Star," James Blish's "Surface Tension," Godwin's "The Cold Equations," Asimov's "The Last Question," Pohl's "Day Million," Heinlein's "It's Great to Be Back." More interesting are lesser known stories like Hilbert Schenk's "time-using aliens'" view of an 1892 ship rescue in "The Morphology of the Kirkham Wreck," Blish's invention of instantaneous interstellar communications in "Beep," Theodore L. Thomas's trip through the multifaceted politics, speculative technology and everyday heroism of weather control in "The Weather Man," the metaphysical horror of Ian Watson's mind-bending "The Very Slow Time Machine," and Rudy Rucker's funny-but-not-so-funny "Ms. Found in a Copy of *Flatland*."

Ursula Le Guin and Brian Attebery's *Norton Book of Science Fiction* offers a more complete vision of what is published as sf today, but put this one on the shelf next to it and you will have a broad view of the contemporary sf short story, from the hardest of hard sf to the magicalest of magical realist sf, a credit to the range of voices and quality of intellect working in our field.

Now for that hackle raising.

The Ascent of Wonder is preceded by three introductions, one each by Cramer and Hartwell, and a guest introduction by Gregory Benford. Benford presents the traditional rationale for writing hard. Hard sf is that which "plays with the net of scientific fact up and strung as tight as the story allows." For Benford this amounts almost to a moral imperative. His touchstone story is Tom Godwin's "The Cold Equations," the famous tale about a girl who stows away on a rescue ship and must be jettisoned because her additional mass will cause the ship to crash. Benford has used this story in his physics classes to illustrate the inflexibility of physical law, the difference between the universe of fact and the universe of human desire.

In the course of his introduction it becomes clear that Benford is a little leery about some of the works that Hartwell and Cramer have chosen; he sees Ballard and Gibson only "at the edge for hard sf" and is clearly skeptical about cyberpunk's credentials. To explain this he uses criteria

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for hard sf that don't have much to do with how high that net is strung. Is the net higher in Bob Shaw's "Light of Other Days," for instance, than it is in Bruce Sterling's "The Beautiful and the Sublime"? Shaw's story introduced the concept of slow glass, in which the index of refraction is so high that it takes years for a ray of light to penetrate it — a wonderful but physically impossible concept which Shaw uses to tell a very human story. Sterling's shows us a 21st century world where, because AI has been perfected, intelligence is as cheap a commodity as electricity, and therefore various meretricious forms of "creativity" are valued over intellect. Ironically, Shaw's classic of hard sf turns more on human emotion than does Sterling's, in which almost every detail of both background and character derives from its extrapolative premise.

Kathryn Cramer makes an observation that may move us toward understanding why the hard sf fan might perceive Shaw as harder than Sterling: Campbellian hard sf is a matter of tone as well as content. "What we call hard sf is more precisely technophilic sf...One is more likely to identify a story as hard sf — regardless of the amount of actual science it contains — if the narrative voice is pragmatic, deterministic, and matter-of-fact." Cramer suggests that in the 1980s "the hard sf attitude became a salable commodity on its own, separable from scientific content...[evolving] into right-wing power fantasies about military hardware" so that "what was generally perceived as hard sf was rapidly degenerating into political allegory."

Hartwell himself points out how, "During the height of Campbell's reign in the forties and fifties, a lot of [hard sf] was also xenophobic, elitist, racist, and psychologically naive." But though he makes the case for a counter-Campbellian "Ballardian" strain of hard sf — pointing out how writers like Gene Wolfe know real science but use it in metaphorical ways — he seems uncomfortable with his own argument and ends up agreeing with Benford that hard sf should have the proper attitude, "the right stuff." He even goes so far as to say that, "In general, hard sf still disdains theology, politics, and Modern art in all its manifestations."

I find this is an astonishing statement. Disdains politics? Much of hard sf, as Hartwell has elsewhere noted, is *driven* by politics. How can a fiction so often political convince itself and others that it is apolitical?

Rationalizing Genius tells us how. Originally appearing in 1989, it is an analysis of all the stories in

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volume one of *The Science Fiction Hall of Fame*. In it academic critic John Huntington proposes that "modern science fiction" as represented by the SFWA's keystone anthology is predicated on certain *unexamined* political assumptions. The writers of Campbellian sf disdain politics because they think that their own political assumptions, unlike those of everyone else, are based solely on reason.

Huntington suggests that traditional hard sf is based on a technocratic faith that social problems are amenable to "scientific" solutions that are as free of human prejudice as the laws of nature. That these laws of nature in society are as rigid as the laws of physics. And that there is a scientific elite of genius, in possession of this knowledge or the ability and temperament to discover it, that is suited to rule although they may not be recognized by society at large.

> [Hard sf] idealizes rationality and sees it as socially benign so long as it is not contaminated by self-interest. Power is not recognized as a problem, and irresolvable conflicts of interest are denied...Its elevation of reason and intellect lead it to repress emotionality and to deny subconscious or irrational motives; as a result, strong feelings, especially those of hatred and envy, are denied, and the actions they motivate are explained as simply reasonable responses to the situation.

Huntington turns *The SF Hall of Fame* upside down to show the gears working underneath. It's not something the writers or fans are likely to enjoy. From the other side, the supposed "playing fair with the reader" on which hard sf prides itself can work as a form of special pleading allowing the author to make his political points while declaring himself immune from the criticism that these points are mere personal opinion. "It's not really my politics," the writer can tell us, "it's the laws of nature that determine the outcome of this story." The strong point of hard sf — its recognition of the difference between scientific fact and opinion — is undermined by such an analysis. Huntington doesn't call into question the truth of science, but shows how the language of science can be used to rationalize fantasies that are not scientific.

Watching Huntington peel away the rhetoric to expose the politics of

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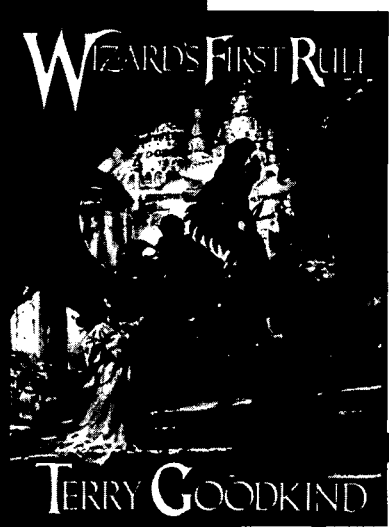

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stories like Heinlein's "The Roads Must Roll" is a humbling and harrowing experience. Makes a writer look over his shoulder for his own unconscious agendas. In Huntington's view, for instance, "The Cold Equations" becomes a touchstone story in ways the hard sf writer does not intend.

For Benford, the story is about how "a woman suffers because she tries to use her innocence to avoid responsibility." Huntington starts by pointing out the technological improbabilities of the story, then asks why these details are not perceived as flaws by Campbellian readers when similar irrationalities would be reason for condemning a "soft" sf story. I can't do justice to his argument here, but Huntington concludes that in this story, "the adherence to a strict rationality can be the excuse for indulging in a deeply problematic fantasy about punishing a woman...the illusion of stability offered by rationality is a screen, not only allowing the reader to indulge the emotions that the hero explicitly controls, but covertly expressing attitudes of which the story itself is unaware."

Huntington's thesis helps explain why a story like "The Beautiful and the Sublime," full of real science, is not admitted to the canon by many hard sf writers: Sterling doesn't have the Campbellian affection for social Darwinism, elites, and libertarianism. In the forties and fifties, when the Campbellian creed went effectively unchallenged, anyone who wrote stories based on real science was a hard sf writer. Once that tradition was opposed, hard sf becomes more something you *are* than something you *write*. Kim Stanley Robinson can set a novel on Mars using cutting edge science, but the fact that he's a political liberal disqualifies him as a hard sf writer. Larry Niven can have the earth rotating backwards (as he did on page one of the first edition of *Ringworld*) and not damage his credentials as a hard sf writer one iota.

I am sure fans of traditional hard sf will disagree with much of this, but to be fair about it, I'm not sure Hartwell and Cramer would. If this debate interests you, read *The Ascent of Wonder*, check *Rationalizing Genius* out of your neighborhood university library, and figure it out for yourself.

Before the police arrive, let me leap from the frying pan into the fire.

Since James Patrick Kelly is my good friend and sometime collaborator, I've thought long and hard before deciding to comment on Kelly's new novel. But as you can see from the above screed, I'm a man of questionable judgment who likes to grind

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political axes, and I can't resist the impulse to comment on why Kelly is not generally perceived as a hard sf writer.

Although Kelly had a story (which turns up, in much different form, as a section of *Wildlife*) in Sterling's *Mirrorshades* anthology, he's not been identified as a cyberpunk and he makes nobody's list of hard sf writers. Yet here's a novel full of information theory, as clued in to cutting edge biotechnology as Greg Bear, giving chapter and verse on designer drugs and brain chemistry, hip to the latest discoveries in planetary astronomy and offering serious speculations about computer intelligence and the possibilities and repercussions of uploading human personalities into computers.

Well, one reason Kelly doesn't appear on the hard sf radar is that, despite his attention to science, this is still a novel of character. The more time a book spends exploring its characters, regardless of its scientific content, the less it will be seen as hard sf.

Parts of *Wildlife* originally appeared as separate stories, but here they are transformed into a *Citizen Kane*-like multiple perspective on the life (or *lives*) of our heroine, Wynne Cage. In part one, 2044, Wynne is a 34-year-old spook journalist attempting to report on but not get involved in a risky caper to steal a personality uploading architecture from a multinational computer corporation. Along the way she falls in love and reveals several psychological wounds. Part two takes us back to Wynne at 17, where we discover how she got this way, as the clone daughter of Tony Cage, 21st century "drug artist" who is more than a father and something less than the ideal lover. Part three, in 2114, is told from the point of view of Wynne's clone son Peter; by this time Wynne has resorted to some drastic measures to cope with her difficult life. Part four, in 2126, brings back Tony and gives us the viewpoint of an unfrozen Wynne who has apparently been in hibernation since 2046.

Some of this explores fairly familiar cyberpunk ground, but Kelly brings to it a series of concerns we don't see much of in cyberpunk. *Wildlife* is about family, the responsibilities of parents to children, the problems of finding one's identity in the shadow of the giant parent (which for Peter, AKA "Mr. Boy," is a literal difficulty, as Wynne has had herself genetically altered into a ten-story replica of the Statue of Liberty in which her son, a perpetual twelve-year-old, lives). F. Scott Fitzgerald once remarked that "the very rich are

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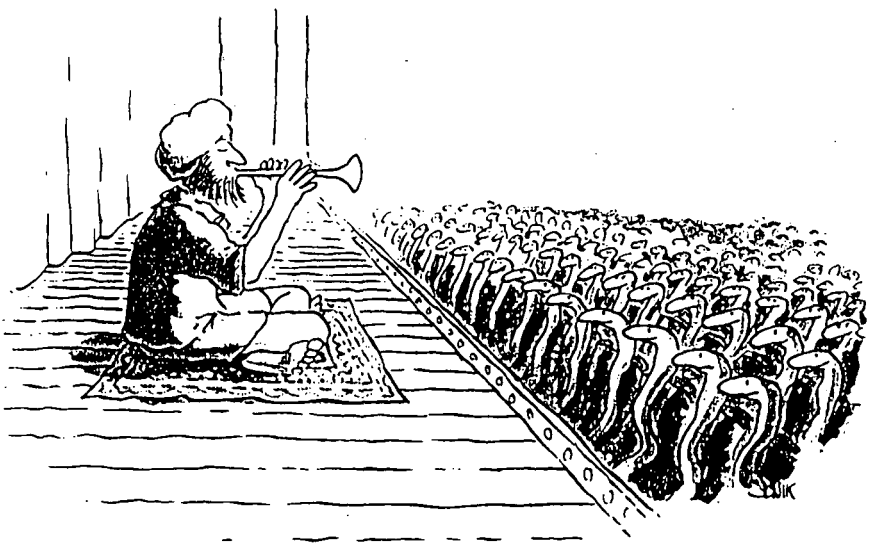
different from you and me." In this book the rich can produce lovers genetically identical to themselves, buy pharmacological enlightenment, launch personal spaceships beyond the solar system, sleep in a deep freeze for a hundred years, and transform themselves into national monuments. But in this hall of mirrors, can they ever become whole people?

And can they escape death? Like Kelly's earlier *Look Into the Sun*, *Wildlife* ends on a speculation about life beyond the body. Thanks to a youth spent in the bosom of Our Lady of the Sacred Heart parish I can spot a lapsed Catholic boy's attempt to find a scientific source for an afterlife a parsec away. In my amateur psychiatric avatar, under which I like to put defenseless writers on the couch, I'd call this *Wildlife*'s unconscious agenda. Suffice to say that Kelly is not so dazzled by science that he makes immortality too easy.

An appropriate place to stop. It often seems to me that all of us science fiction writers, soft or hard, are alike — trying to produce our heart's desire in a paper world. A properly religious person would consider us to be playing the game without a net.

Comments or questions?: contact Kessel on the Internet at tenshi@unity.ncsu.edu



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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

PRINCE OMBRA, by Roderick MacLeish, Orb Books, 1994; 320pp; $11.95, Trade paperback.

EVERY SO often a book comes along that's a true classic. Books like John Crowley's *Little, Big* (1981), R.A. MacAvoy's *Tea With the Black Dragon* (1983), *The Land of Laughs* by Jonathan Carroll (1981), or even Tolkien's tetralogy that began with *The Hobbit* (1937). They may not sell in huge numbers immediately, but they garner a fierce and loyal following and, should they go out of print, are lovingly passed along from one reader to another to spread the word.

Roderick MacLeish's *Prince Ombra* certainly fits in that class. Initially published in 1982, it was enthusiastically embraced and fondly remembered once it went out of print. MacLeish published a few other books, before and after this one, but none of the others quite stand the test of time, perhaps because none of them can match the powerful mythic resonance that lies at the heart of Prince Ombra.

An initial glance through the book might not make it seem too promising. It becomes obvious fairly quickly that MacLeish is working with archetypes. Bentley Ellicott is the innocent youth around whom great events gather, the hero with a thousand and one faces who has been born again to confront a world-threatening danger. "Slally" Drake is his faithful companion — or "rememberer" as MacLeish puts it — the one who gives moral support and will tell the story of his success or defeat so that his memory will live on as a warning to others. Bentley's psychiatrist, Dr. Kreistein, is the mentor figure, the shaman, the old man, Arthur's Merlin. And of course there is Prince Ombra, the essence of evil who comes from outside the world to ravage all that is good.

Prince Ombra is the only one to remain an archetype. MacLeish fleshes out the others and adds a rich

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supporting cast so that while it's true we are reading an old story, retold many times before, all the details are different — and even the outcome remains in question until the final confrontation. MacLeish has a simple prose style that is at once lyric and compelling. Like the best writers — the ones we reread for the language, once we know the story — he has an eye for the apt phrase, the perfect analogy, the detailing of a scene or a character that brings it immediately to life. Long after the actual plot has faded back into the archetypal roots of Story from which it first originated, MacLeish's gifts of insight and language remain with us as a source of ongoing pleasure.

Prince Ombra is one of those books that makes me envy those of you who will be reading it now for the first time. MacLeish writes from the heart, with a full range of authorial skills, but more importantly, he does it so very well.

FROM THE TEETH OF ANGELS, by Jonathan Carroll, Doubleday, 1994; 212pp; $22.00 Hardcover.

In the past Jonathan Carroll had proven to be one of those infuriating authors. As we do in the works of the late Clifford D. Simak, we come upon fascinating characters and situations in Carroll's novels; they are presented with insight, frequently from startling perspectives, in language that often begs to be read aloud, but then, far too often, the whole thing fizzles out right at the end. There's nothing quite so frustrating as finding everything one could wish for in a book, only to have it fall flat in the final stretch. But you keep coming back for more, because everything else is just so damn good and, like Charlie Brown considering the football that Lucy is holding for him, you have this blind hope that this time it'll all work out. Not necessarily comfortably. I'm not talking about a need for happy endings — just for endings that make sense. Endings that grow out of all that's gone before, rather than coming at us from somewhere out of deep left field.

For those of you who have been burned before, let me assure you that *From the Teeth of Angels* is one of the winners. The only ones who'll be disappointed this time out are those who approach the book as a fantasy; readers with no expectations, or an understanding of more mainstream sensibilities, will be as delighted with this as they might be with the works of Alice Hoffman, or Marquez. Which isn't to say that magical elements are absent — they simply aren't the

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book's *raison d'être.*

From the Teeth of Angels is a consideration of death. One of the principal viewpoint characters is dying of leukemia. Other characters die, or are confronted with death, both figuratively and literally — and when I say the latter, I mean they come face-to-face with death as we know it, but also with Death as a being.

Death, as we meet him here, allows one to ask questions of him, usually when one is dreaming, and if you don't understand the answers you wake with a terrible scar or wound. If you don't understand enough questions, you die, and not pleasantly. But if you do understand.... Well, nothing is simple in this novel, but what makes it so wonderful is how Carroll's principal characters finally come to terms with the issue. No, they don't discover the secret of immortality, but they do come to understand Death more than he would like them to, and that, within the context of this story, is victory enough.

From the Teeth of Angels is perhaps one of Carroll's darkest outings to date, but it is also filled with moments of great light, hope and courage, and I came away from it — not happy, but able to share in the characters' bittersweet victory and full of questions about what we do with our lives while we live them, why we do what we do, and what we should do. He shows us how secrets that lie in the past chew away at our present, even when we're unaware of them. And he shows us a way out, a way we can get past feelings of sadness and hopelessness and carry on.

All that in language that sings, in a storytelling style that's at once gripping and filled with observational asides and an often wry humor to offset the darkness. Not a bad accomplishment to pull off in a short 212 pages.

NEAR DEATH, by Nancy Kilpatrick, Pocket Books, October 1994; $5.50, Paperback.

A New York City junkie, fresh off the plane and strung out, shows up at an English manor with a note telling her to only enter the building after dark, whereupon she's supposed to drive a stake through the heart of the vampire she finds sleeping there. But of course vampires don't sleep at night and the next thing Zero knows, she's the captive of David Hardwick, one hundred years dead, who wants to know who sent her. What's especially puzzling is why she was told to enter the manor after dark, when whoever sent her knew Hardwick

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would be mobile and able to defend himself.

So begins Nancy Kilpatrick's first novel. It starts in the middle of the action and barrels along, straight through until the end. Definitely a page-turner, with a plot full of surprises that lie, one inside the other, like Chinese puzzle boxes. Every time you think you have things figured out, Kilpatrick throws a wrench into the works; new revelations only complicate matters, which is how it should be in a thriller.

Like many of those chronicling stories of the undead, Kilpatrick postulates good and bad vampires, and the enmity between them, but *Near Dark* is also a struggle between the two and an exploration of what it means to be human, using the vampire experience as a metaphor for the moral dichotomy that we have to struggle with in our own lives. She adds a few new wrinkles to vampire lore, but I did have to wonder how often she has crossed international borders herself when I came to the section where Hardwick — decked out with a suit of metallic cloth under his clothes, a mask on his face and a suitcase full of jars of homemade ointment — manages to get through airport security and customs as easily as he does.

But that's a small carp. More distressing is a tendency she has to tell her story in a manner that renders her prose a little too workmanlike at times — at least for this reader. While it doesn't slow the story down by any means, or even hurt the believability of her characters, it does make it unlikely one would want to reread the book. But perhaps I'm looking for too much in a thriller. *Near Dark* is certainly a page-turner, delivering the goods on the visceral levels, and it raises a number of fascinating questions about inter-human relationships in the process, which is more than one gets from most first novels.

COYOTE BLUE, by Christopher Moore, Simon & Schuster, 1994; 303pp.

There's a concept making the rounds of literary circles called cultural misappropriation. What it boils down to is that certain critics, writers and activists take offense at the notion of someone writing from a cultural viewpoint other than their own. Most of the discussions appear to center around men writing about women's characters and women's issues, or non-Natives using Native characters and culture, but encompasses anyone appropriating what is perceived as the

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"voice" of a minority.

Imagine if writers actually took these complaints to heart when they set out to tell their stories. For one thing, we'd lose most of our sf, fantasy and horror, because how can anyone knowledgeably write from the viewpoint of aliens, elves or monsters? And who'd want to read a whole novel in which all the characters were basically cut from the same cloth?

The argument seems silly to me, although I do understand its origin. Minority writers interested in exploring their own cultures can often have a harder time selling their work because of the marketplace's misconception that such stories won't appeal to a large enough — read WASP — audience of readers. Since they can have difficulty, they feel it's unfair when a non-minority writer does get to sell such a book. It seems as though their place on the bookshelf has been stolen. It's a problem that needs addressing, but charges of cultural misappropriation aren't the answer.

Don't get me wrong. I'm all for widening the literary gene pool myself and actively seek out work by what are perceived as minority writers, be they women, Hispanics, blacks, Natives, gays, whatever. My only real criteria is that the writing be good. The chance to have a peek into another culture or lifestyle is simply an added bonus. But I'm also interested in what outsiders have to say when they write from a cultural viewpoint other than their own, although when they do so, not only does the writing have to be good, but I also want to know that they did their research and that they aren't disrespectful to the culture they're exploring. And they have to capture the spirit of that culture, not simply the physical trappings.

Christopher Moore does an excellent job of that with *Coyote Blue*. Coyote, the Native Trickster figure, is a tough character to get right, especially since he's been embraced by the New Age crowd who seem to want to make him over into some sort of spiritual guide. What writers too often forget is that Coyote doesn't simply play tricks, and he isn't a contemporary stand-in for the wise magician so over-used in high fantasy. Traditionally, Coyote is ribald, amoral and completely self-centered. He has a highly developed sense of humor and he fails as often as he succeeds in an endeavor — it's all part of his charm. Check out Barry Lopez's collection of traditional Native Trickster stories, *Giving Birth to Thunder, Sleeping with His Daughter* (1977), for a good example of what I mean.

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Or try *Coyote Blue* for a contemporary update. Moore retells a few of those old stories, interspersing them into the narrative when they are relevant to the ongoing action. But more importantly, the true spirit of Coyote infuses this story of an insurance salesman who, after long denying his Native roots, is forced to confront them by being pulled kicking and screaming into the world of the Trickster.

I can't begin to give you all the details in the space we have here. But I will tell you that Moore's novel is one of the most invigorating, funny, serious, outrageous and fascinating novels you'll read this year. The section with Coyote trying to play oneupmanship in Las Vegas is worth the price of admission alone. The book is somewhat slighter than Thomas King's brilliant *Green Grass, Running Water* which appeared and was largely ignored last year, but that's only because Moore has chosen a narrower focus. And frankly, since King already explained in his book the entire history of the uncomfortable relationship between whites and Natives, from when they first met until the present time, Moore was wise to decide to concentrate his attention on just a few aspects of Coyote, coming up with a great explanation for the Trickster's origin as he did so.

When you finish *Coyote Blue* I think you'll be as delighted as I was that Moore didn't allow himself to be swayed from the story he wanted to tell by possible accusations of cultural misappropriation.

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We're pleased to have some short fiction from Gardner Dozois. His short stories are too few and far between. Although he has won two Nebulas for his fiction, he is perhaps better known for his award-winning editing skills. Every month he edits an issue of Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, *and each year he compiles* The Year's Best Science Fiction *for St. Martin's Press. His most recent work of book-length fiction is a short story collection,* Geodesic Dreams: The Best Short Fiction of Gardner Dozois, *published by Ace.*

In "A Cat Horror Story," Gardner takes on a difficult alien viewpoint — one that exists close to home.

A Cat Horror Story

By Gardner Dozois

DARKNESS. THE SMELL OF grass, and wet earth, and fog. The night moved through the clearing like a river. A few distant pinpricks of stars overhead, faint and far and pale. Somewhere down the hill, the grass rustled as a mouse fled through it, but the People were not hunting tonight.

Eyes gleamed in the night. Occasionally, a tail would thump the ground, once, twice, and then fall still. Very occasionally — an act of bravado — one of the People would slowly, ostentatiously, lick a paw. Then stop.

You could smell the excitement in the wet air, the uneasiness, the fear.

The wind brought the distant sound of a dog barking, and the ears of the People pricked forward instinctively, but, on this night of all nights, there was certainly no time for *dogs*.

Somewhere down below, in one of the human lairs at the foot of the hill, you could hear a human[1] calling for one of the People in that shrill mixture

[1] *In the True Tongue, the word we render here as "human" is more closely expressed as "Bad-Smelling-Foodgiver-and-Lair-Mate-Who-Speaks-Loudly-and-Moves-Slowly," although that also is a loose translation, and subject to variation in local dialects.*

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of human talk, strange wet noises, and oddly garbled and nonsensically out-of-context phrases of the True Tongue that humans used to try to summon the People who were lair-mates with them, but none of the People were interested in Food tonight, even the fattest or the hungriest of them, not even when the human made an enticing rattling noise with a Food-Opening-Stick against a Cold Round Thing of Food. After a while, the human ceased his plaintive calls, and there was silence again, except for the human sounds riding the night air: doors slamming, voices, the annoying clamoring and shrieking of the Noisy Dead Things with which the humans insisted on cluttering the lairs, the growling of the Fast Dead Things which the humans kept as slaves and actually encouraged to *swallow* them! (although they made the Things spit them up again later)...but the People were used to those sounds, and ignored them.

At last, when the sharp smells of excitement could get no stronger, when their eyes could grow no wider or wilder, and when their tails were beginning to lash with impatience with a noise like a strong wind slashing through the branches of trees, the full moon rose, immense and pale and round, its pockmarked face pitiless and remote and cold, and that cruel orb was reflected full and bright in all the watching eyes of all the People who waited below.

One of the People stretched and yawned, showing all his teeth. His name was Caeser[2], and he was known as a good hunter, and a fierce defender of his territory. In fact, he had a bloody feud of long duration and rich tradition going with Jefferson, whose territory adjoined his own, but Jefferson sat quietly beside him now, and did no more than turn a slightly disdainful glance at Caeser's display of teeth. This was no time for fighting, or mating, or for territoriality. The Hunter Light, the Death Light, The Night Face, That-Which-Lights-the-Way-to-Kill, was in the sky, and that had always meant the same thing, for uncounted generations back to the beginning of all.

It was time to tell stories, under the cold, watchful gaze of The Night Face.

"This I have seen," Caeser began. "I was hunting with the tom named Bigfoot, and we came to the place where all the grass stops, and for almost as

[2] *This was the name his humans had given him, of course. The True Names of the People are impossible to reproduce here, as the verbal element is only a small part of each name, and perhaps the most insignificant part, the really vital information being conveyed by body posture, the speed and stiffness of movement, the position of the ears and tail, the pattern of ruffling or twitching of the fur, and, most importantly, the hot rich smell of the anus, and the lingering, eloquent tang of urine.*

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far as you can see, until the trees start again far away, the ground is flat and hard and smells of Dead Things. I warned Bigfoot that this was Ghostland, the territory of demons[3] and monsters, but his hunting blood was up, and the hunting is good under the trees at night, and he would not listen. And so we went out across the hard, bad-smelling stuff. Out into Ghostland."

Caeser looked away for a moment, out toward the far horizon, then turned his eyes back to the People. "We walked out across Ghostland. The Dead Stuff was cold and hard under our paws, and we could hear our claws skritch on it. The wind carried the voices of ghosts as it whined past us. Suddenly, there was a bright light, far away, but coming closer. Closer! I froze with fear, but, in his eagerness, Bigfoot went on. There was a growling noise, louder and louder, like all the dogs that ever were born, growling at once. And then there was a light, blinding me. The light! So bright, so close, as if The Night Face had fallen from the sky down on top of me! Then a Fast Dead Thing went by with a roar that shook the world and a blast of wind that nearly knocked me over, and with a smell of burning. I heard Bigfoot scream."

Caeser paused, and the rest of the People crept a step or two closer to hear him. "When the Fast Dead Thing was gone," he continued, "I went back, step by slow step, to see what had happened to Bigfoot." Caeser paused again, significantly. "He was *dead*. The Fast Dead Thing had crushed him. His guts were everywhere, torn from his body, and his blood was all around. The middle of his body was *flat*, as though it had no bones in it anymore. He was mashed into the dead black ground of Ghostland, in a puddle of his own guts and blood. On his face was a look of fear and horror such as I hope never to see again."

The People shivered. After a moment, Caeser said, "Then I heard it coming *back*. The Fast Dead Thing. I saw its light. It was coming back from the way it had gone. Coming back for *me*. I'm not ashamed to tell you all that I ran like a kitten! And ever since then, when I go near Ghostland, I can hear the Fast Dead Thing hunting for me, roaring back and forth, hunting through the night to *find* me."

There was an awed silence, and then a young queen named Katy said, "I hear they can get you *anywhere*, the Fast Dead Things." She looked around her nervously. "Even inside the lair. There are some of them who can follow

[3] *The human word "demons," of course, has associations with Christian theology that the actual phrase in the True Tongue does not share, but it will serve to give an impression of something both malefic and enigmatic, an incomprehensible force that kills you with terrifying casualness, for unknowable reasons — if for any reason at all; this is more vivid in the speech of the People.*

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you right *in*, and get you even when you're inside. My mother told me that she used to get chased by a little one that roared and whooshed and tried to pull her tail."

"That was just a Small Roaring Thing," a tom named Pooter said. "The humans play with them. They're not really dangerous — though, of course, it's better to stay away from them, just to be safe. But the Fast Dead Things, now — they can kill you even when they're *asleep*!"

"Nothing can kill you while it's asleep," Jefferson said.

Pooter bristled, then licked his foot in a slow and insulting way that might have been provocation for a fight on another evening. "Yes? Well, *I* have seen *this*. There was one of the People, her name was Lady Jane, and she went near one of the Fast Dead Things at night, while it was sleeping. And she crawled inside the top of the Thing, because the night was cold, and it was warm deep up inside the Thing. And in the morning, as I was watching, a human came and made the Fast Dead Thing swallow it, and then the Thing woke up." He shuddered. "It growled, and then it roared, and then Lady Jane *screamed*, and I smelled the hot smell of her blood. The human got out, and made the Thing open up its smaller mouth in the front, and then he lifted Lady Jane *out*. And she was dead. *Dead*, and cut into pieces! Her head was cut nearly all the way off, hanging by some fur!"

"Dead!" some of the People moaned. "Dead!"

A scarred old feral tom named Blackie, who had one ear torn nearly to rags, said, "You don't need Dead Things to kill you, young ones!" He lashed his tail and made the clicking and smacking noise that signified deep contempt among the People. "*Humans* will do the job readily enough! Yes, your precious humans, the things you all *live* with, willingly! When I was a kitten, some humans put me in a sack[4], and threw me in the river. Ai, the horror of it!" He shivered and shook himself convulsively. "It was dark and hot and smothering, and I couldn't breathe, and then I was *falling*, twisting and tumbling and falling, and there was no *air* to breathe! My claws were sharp in those days, People, lucky for me, and I ripped my way *out*. But then

[4] *"False Skin" is about the closest you can come to this in the True Tongue, which doesn't allow for much precision in distinguishing between one sort of thing made of cloth or fabric and another; some dialects will allow reference to blankets as "False-Skins-That-You-Sleep-On." All this is as nothing compared to conveying some sense of what the human word "river" actually translates to in the True Tongue — the literal "Moving Big Water" does little to convey the sense of horror and supernatural dread with which the People regard such bodies of water, as though they were an unholy and dreadful anomaly in the natural order of the world.*

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I was *in the water*! In the water! I was *under* the water, with it all around me — over my *head*! I had to *swim*, swim for my life, and I nearly died before my head broke the surface and I could take a breath, and then I had to swim for a long time before my feet found the ground again, and all the while the water was *pulling* at me, sucking at me, trying to pull me down to death!"

A low growl went around the circle of the People. Their eyes gleamed.

"*My* human goes in the water every day," a young queen named Spooky said. "On *purpose*. She lets it go all over her! She doesn't try to escape at *all!* Sometimes she sits *under* the water, with only her head outside it!"

The People moaned in horror. "Ah, they are strange creatures," Jefferson muttered. "Strange!"

"But those were Rogues, those humans who tried to kill you," a young tom named Bangers said, somewhat uneasily, as though seeking reassurance. "We've all been chased and kicked by Rogues now and again, or had stones or Hard Clattering Things thrown at us. That doesn't mean that our humans would hurt us. *My* humans wouldn't hurt *me*. They like me! They feed me and pat[5] me whenever I want them to!"

"*I* had humans once, too, later on," Blackie said bitterly. "They fed me and they patted me — and then they cut my balls off!"

Bangers hissed involuntarily, and many of the People blew their tails out to several times their normal size.

"It could happen to *you*, too, young one!" Blackie said. "Don't you think it couldn't! You think you're safe with your humans because they feed you and give you a warm place to sleep, but you never know when they're going to *turn* on you and torture[6] you. You'll never know *why* they do it, either, but sooner or later, they will. They *all* will. *None* of them are any different!"

"They wait until you're *sick*," a burly tom named Hobbes said. "They wait until you're feeling really bad, and then they take you to the Pain Place, to the Torture Place, and they hurt you *more* —"

Another tom shuddered. "It's true! The humans there stick things up

[5] *Actually, "groom me," in the True Tongue. The People consider humans to be bizarrely handicapped creatures since they must groom with their hands rather than with their tongues. They are widely pitied for this, although there is derisive speculation as to why this is so — in fact, in one dialect, the generic term for "human" translates to "Those-Who-Must-Groom-With-Their-Paws-Because-Their-Breath-Smells-So-Bad."*

[6] *In the True Tongue, the word for "torture" also implies a sort of willful, capricious, malevolent playfulness, and a highly refined aesthetic appreciation of the pain you are inflicting; if you've ever seen one of the People with a bird or a mouse that they've caught, you get the idea.*

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your ass! And they *stab* you, with things that hurt! And they drain your *blood* out of you!"

"They *cut* you!" a queen named Jasmine said, her voice thrilling with horror. "They cut you *open*! My humans took me there, to the Pain Place, with all its bad smells and its sick smells and the sounds of the People screaming in agony while *dogs* sit around and watch them, and they *left* me there, locked in a Box-You-Can't-Get-Out-Of, and I went to sleep, and when I woke up, my belly had been slashed open! I could *feel* the cut, deeper than a cut from any fight. It hurt for a long time, even when my humans came and got me and took me back to the lair again. It hurt for a *long* time!"

They were crouched close together now, almost touching, their heads in a circle.

"They *kill* People there, too," Blackie said. "The humans kill them. And not just the humans who live in the Pain Place. *Your* precious humans. The very same ones who live with you and give you Food. *They* kill you, themselves!"

There were a few wails of protest, and the People pressed closer together, shuddering.

"I have *seen* it," Blackie continued inexorably. "When they cut my balls off, in the Pain Place, before they took me back to the lair and I ran away, they brought my lair-mate in, an old queen named Stuff who had lived with the humans before I joined them. *Our* humans brought her in, and they held her down while she fought to get away, both of them held her down, and then another human stabbed her with a Pain Stick, and she struggled for a while, and then she *died*! I could smell that she was dead! They'd killed her! *Our* humans! They held her down and killed her—and they *patted* her while they were doing it!"

Someone moaned with dread, and then fell silent.

"And that's what will happen to *all* of you! Every one of you! If a dog or a Fast Dead Thing or some other kind of monster or demon doesn't get you, then, at the end, your own *humans* will kill you!"

This was almost too much. They pressed close together for comfort, too scared even to wail or moan now.

There was a crazed light in Blackie's eyes. "I saw Stuff's ghost last night. I often see it, after dark. Her fur is like ice, like frost on a winter morning, and her dead eyes give back no light..."

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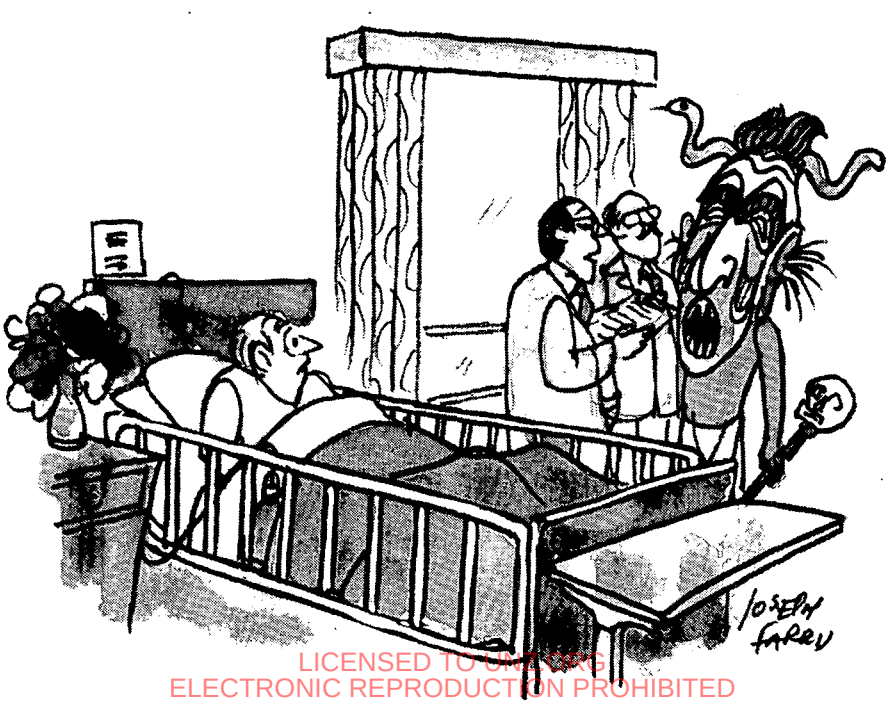
The moon was high and full above them now, and it seemed to tug on their souls, as if it would suck them out through the tops of their heads and up into the mysterious depths of the night sky, where they would fall forever through the dark.

"Yes!" a tom shrieked. "Yes! I have *seen* it! Its feet leave no mark on the grass when it walks, and its eyes are like deep pools of black water! And one night, when everyone slept except me, I could hear it outside, scratching on the door, trying to get in —"

A huge Dead Thing went by overhead, roaring, a blazing light flying through the night sky like a terrible gazing eye, seeming to pass almost close enough to touch, and the People crouched low on the hillside until the monster had rumbled away into distance and was gone.

In the sudden shocked silence, Caeser said, almost with satisfaction, "The Ghostway is around us, always." And the People shivered deliciously, and moved closer in the night, and told their stories until the moon went down, as they have for a million generations, and as they will for a million more, until the Earth goes cold, and even the People are forgotten.



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Parke Godwin made his last appearance in F&SF *in our February, 1982 issue with "Sergeant Pepper Variations," which he wrote in collaboration with Howard Roller. Since then, he has published some very fine novels, including* Sherwood *and* Robin and the King *(Avon Books).*

About "Small Change," he writes, "I've always been very lucky at finding pennies and nickels — sometimes quarters and, once, ten dollars — dropped on the pavement. In the last few years, I've wondered: what if a guy could get it all! Just how much money would he reap in one day! One week! One year! There must be a substantial piece of small change jingling unnoticed to the pavements of America. Since the notion wouldn't go away, I eventually wrote it down."

Small Change

By Parke Godwin

GONVILLE LEMMING, CONtrary to his name, would not run headlong over a cliff for anyone, not even his boyhood friend, Hibbert Snodgrass. For Snoddy, Lemming wouldn't step off a curb, for fear of missing a dropped coin. Both were compulsive collectors, though their tastes diverged early on. Snodgrass made a false start in matchbook covers at ten and built an impressive collection before enthusiasm waned. At thirteen he foresaw no future in the field — but his fate was sealed when, scuffing along the street with Lemming en route to a Saturday matinee of *I Walked with a Zombie*, Snodgrass snatched from the sidewalk a freshly discarded, still fragrant Wrigley's spearmint gum wrapper. Simultaneously, Lemming spotted a dime, dulled and worn, barely discernible from the concrete it lay upon.

Within a few years each became a master tracker of his particular quarry. The scion of well-off people, Snodgrass gave little thought to money but could spot a gum wrapper at thirty paces: new ones, old ones, foot-stamped, grimy or rain-sodden, they added to his burgeoning horde.

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"A penny found is a penny earned," Lemming maintained, poorer but equally sharp of vision. No carelessly dropped coin or bill escaped the radar sweep of his relentless quest. A steady jingle of copper and silver flowed into his poke, though he never spent any of it without severe crisis of principle. He developed the eyesight of a raptor, the whole paved city his mousing ground, able to detect a penny — the dark steel 1943 penny, mind you, rare in itself — on new pavement of the same hue fifteen yards away.

With time and maturity, Snodgrass and Lemming passed from practice to higher theory. Lemming could never convince Snodgrass that gum wrappers held no investment value even in the esoteric world of collecting. Jaded, unheeding, Snodgrass sought new heights. Spearmint, Juicy Fruit, Beeman's, PlenTipak, Carefree and Cinnaburst he regarded as mere prelude to ultimate triumph. He heard of a fellow wrapper enthusiast a thousand miles away and negotiated for a year by mail to buy the collection, offering a handsome price, for it contained one of the very few grails of the narrow field: War Card wrappers from 1938, almost unobtainable in any condition. Snodgrass's offer passed from ridiculous to fabulous, but the owner adamantly refused to sell. How Snodgrass finally acquired that trove and went on to plan the capstone of his career was whispered darkly in the dusty meeting places of his kind.

Think of *objets d'art* so rare they are only rumored to exist, the stuff of legend. The actual cask in which once lay the myrrh bestowed on the infant Jesus by an oriental king, a handful of the grave earth of Vlad the Impaler, a piece of the True Cross — these are comparable. For Snodgrass had tracked down Fleer Flickers gumball wrappers ca. 1940 with a cartoon strip printed on the inner side of each. He was envied, of course...but colleagues muttered of his methods and the lengths to which Snodgrass was prepared to go with price clearly no object.

At forty, obsessed, neglecting the business he inherited until it failed, Snodgrass was forced to offer his treasures for sale just to live. Futile and far too late. Only a handful of collectors specialized in gum wrappers and none could afford his legendary prizes at a fraction of their worth. He died a broken man, never losing his pathetic faith in Fleer Flickers, clutching the rarest of them to his breast as he expired.

Of a sterner breed, Lemming never loaned a penny without the return of two. In an expansive mood he might tip a waitress nine percent, but such

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generosity withered early and died as his love of found money distilled at last to the Absolute with his retrieval of a damp twenty dollar bill from the unpleasant floor of a YMCA men's room. Unlike the late Snodgrass, this was not culmination to Lemming, but a new door flung wide on vistas shimmering with genius. He trembled with his vision. On any given day he could find a coin on any street. Multiply that by whole towns, cities, the entire country: a *fortune* daily falling unheeded to pavements everywhere. Today America, tomorrow the world...

If he could somehow sweep up all of it every day. Impossible, of course, but suppose...

The ambition would not fade but grew in Gonville Lemming. A vast, untapped grid of streets, cities, and states where lost coins lay star-scattered over a concrete cosmos, gleaming in imagination, firing his dreams at night.

Suppose...

The wings of Icarus had eventually to pass from fancy to fact; Lemming's vision must translate from chimera to *fait accompli.* As Snodgrass was rumored to have done,he overleaped human possibility to the possible at any cost. From a retired Satanist who had renounced the black arts to marry and care for an alcoholic church organist, Lemming purchased a grimoire guaranteed to contain the spells he needed, an arcane volume bound in foxed pigskin with parchment folio leaves. Counting her exorbitant price, the erstwhile lady of shadows offered practical advice.

"Some of these spells are tricky and all are dangerous. When you're ready to make the call, I recommend a large asbestos mat."

Lemming practiced, Lemming delved, fired by the undeniable truth that while he learned, sharp-eyed children, bag ladies, unworthy homeless, anyone and *every*one was reaping daily the harvest rightfully his. His first invocations were flat failures, intermediate stages frustrating. Within his circle he was amazed, despite technique fast approaching mastery, how often he could summon one entity and receive another, like Mexican telephone service. Shady stock brokers, real estate speculators, collection agents, languid and androgynous Californians committed to health food, even a Scientologist loyal to the movement beyond death, who exhorted Lemming to join. So it went for weeks and months of abortive agony illuminated only by the distant gleam of profit.

Then, late one evening in the dark of the moon, when a heavy fog hung

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over Lemming's street and morale, the flames leaped suddenly higher on the asbestos. There came to his nostrils not the expected reek of sulfur but a subtler effluvium of expensive aftershave, together with a few bars of elevator music — and a natty young man in a sixties vintage suit with narrow lapels and a slim funereal tie peered at him from behind black, very mod horn-rimmed glasses. His fulsome Power Lunch smile flashed from thirty-two precisely capped teeth. He raised a manicured hand in greeting. A jeweled Rolex winked below platinum-linked cuffs.

"Hey, guy. Glad you got it together. Call me J.B."

Lemming felt like a man battering for hours at a door that opened unexpectedly, hurling him through on his own impetus. "Uh...yes."

"Formerly with BBD&O," his visitor said briskly. "I handle the power accounts. Don't want to hype you, but I'm the guy who thought of squeezing the Charmin. Sorry it took you so long to get through. I'm backed up on calls, but the Front Office is wholly in sync with your efforts. You want to explore the area of options, or do we cut to the chase and deal?"

A man able to spot a 1943 steel penny on dark concrete is not long without presence of mind. When Lemming regained his, he presented his strategy. Every dropped coin from every state (lower forty-eight for a start; later he might expand) every day for the rest of his life. Delivery at midnight in paper bank wrappers, daily statement included. Innovative, of course, but could they handle it, yes or no?

J.B. — even he who put entertainment into toilet paper and eroticized hair cream for television — was impressed. The capped teeth flashed in a smile that would have wooed Magdalene away from Christ.

"Well?" Lemming waited. "Can do?"

"Bottom line, G.L.? It's big. Overwhelming. Inspired." The flames sprang up and disappeared with the apparition. Lemming fidgeted and mumbled for an hour, convinced he'd blown El Dorado for good. He was just settling down to read a best-seller stolen from the local library, when J.B., *sans* combustion or music, abruptly filled the air in front of him. Lemming felt a bit jangled. "Hey, give some warning. Don't you always come in flames?"

"Only at first. The Satanists expect it, like holly at Christmas. G.L., you've done it. I told the front office — played it cool, trotted your idea around the block to see where it stopped — " J.B.'s expansive gesture carved success in the air — "and they fucking lit *up*, even the Prince."

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Who, he informed Lemming with genuine respect, had the cosmic foresight to sell capitalism to the Russians. "He's on fire with it. Challenging, he said. Original, immense! The only glitch..."

"What, what?" Lemming caught him up, unable and unwilling to turn back now. "I know there has to be a contract."

That was the obstacle: almost no precedent for Legal to go on. No felony was involved, just lost and found and finders keepers. "The Front Office wants the deal for the pure top drawer thinking, guy. You are *in*." J.B.'s ferret-sharp features glowed with the transcendent joy of seraphim. "No problemo. We always cut the contract to the deal; that's why we've lasted in business. And here's the beauty part. It's gratis."

The magic word plucked true music from the untuned strings of Lemming's heart. "Free..."

J.B. shrugged; the narrow lapels rose and fell. "Well, almost free. Sweetie, that's a detail. We're talking moon walk here. Mars walk, a giant step for mankind."

"Not yet. Back up." Lemming braked hard as the modifier twanged a more typical note in his soul. "What's this 'almost'?"

Okay, up front, cards on the table. Front Office was willing to take the contract at or near cost, but naturally not a dead loss. "Quid pro quo, G.L. Our quid measured exactly to your quo. Not a day, not a second more. Hey, did I say this was gorgeous?"

J.B. flourished a short-form contract before Lemming, offering a tasteful Waterman pen for signing. The client deferred until he had microscopically scrutinized every line for the boilerplate of legal grief: hidden clauses, default penalties. There were none. Cut and dried, straight as a ruler. However long he lived, he repaid that much time and not a day longer. Lemming signed, J.B. pocketed the contract and consulted his Rolex with a flick of the platinumed wrist.

"Five to midnight — uh, that's my pen, G.L. He'll be here soon."

Lemming surrendered the silver mounted pen regretfully. "Who?"

"Collector Number Five, one of our best. Solid rep, great on detail."

"Here?" Lemming swallowed hard. "He's coming here now?"

"On the dot. In good faith you get credit for today. Where do you want the stash?"

An embarrassment of gilded fate. As the clock hands closed to scissor off

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the day, Lemming gestured vaguely. "Upstairs...I guess. In the spare bedroom."

"You got. Oh, baby, just one teensy thing. Come midnight, don't bug the delivery man, okay? By twelve he's worked his buns off and in no mood to klatsch. Just let him do his thing, then go in and start counting. Ciao."

By way of farewell, J.B. simply imploded. A hole opened in the air, sucked him in and away. Minutes later Lemming heard a muffled poof! above, then movement and the sound of much bulk set down heavily about the floor and furniture. Then another poof and silence.

Elated but unnerved, Lemming crept upstairs to listen outside the bedroom. After a timorous five minutes he opened the door cautiously and snapped on the lights. No sulfurous smell, only the rank locker room odor of heavy physical exertion and—perhaps his stressed imagination—a sourness beyond the olfactory in the air, as if someone had left bitter curses in his wake like the reverberation of a slammed door.

A moment's impression, no more. On the bed, chairs, nightstand, stacked on a side table, sprawled over the floor, was a small fortune in neatly rolled pennies, nickels, dimes, quarters, and Kennedy halves, pyramids of coins on the table, other piles collapsed under the sheer weight of their worth, spilling into the adjoining bathroom. Tucked into a sheaf of grimy bills, in a hand precise to the point of fussiness, was the accounting in each denomination and the day's total: seven hundred dollars and thirty-six cents.

Lemming trembled and gibbered, sinking to his knees and fondling the bills, groping through rolled quarters, stroking like a lover's breasts the solid half dollars. One day, just *one*, and seven hundred clams! Speculation ran riot: times seven was forty nine hundred a week, near twenty thousand a month. In a year over two hundred and thirty-five thousand dollars, to say nothing of potential bank interest.

Speak of miracles. Like a child at the beach, Lemming piled the coins about him in a high bastion of currency. He'd *done* it, dreamed the impossible dream and made it real. At two A.M. his play fortress had attained the embellishments of a late Norman castle. With a nihilistic cackle, Lemming destroyed it with a sweep of his arm. He yawned, deciding henceforth to sleep here in his Collection room where cold cash could warm his heart. He cleared the bedspread of lucre, and the sound of it clunking heavily to the floor was the benediction of manna pattering down upon his parched soul.

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"And it's legal," Lemming chortled into darkness and the unlimited future overhead. "No eternal price, just day for day. Can I cut a sweet deal?"

What price after all? Forty, fifty years. No more than alternate service, he thought blissfully as his eyes closed, like joining the Peace Corps to avoid the draft.

If the faceless Collector slaved unceasingly, Lemming toiled as well. He grew accustomed to the midnight ritual on the last stroke of the hour, and poof! scrabble, clunk, and thump overhead, muffled muttering, poof! again...and silence. Heavy days on a Superbowl weekend, light on April 15 after taxes when no one had much to drop, but never a day missed. Always the same meticulous accounting by his Collector, the rank smell of undeodorized sweat, and more money. Lemming lost five pounds sacking and carrying the loot to the bank before he gave in with bitter reluctance and bought a fourth-hand Econoline van to transport his wealth.

His first bank and then a second grew concerned with currency storage. After a fierce agony of scruples — you didn't *spend* money, for God's sake — Lemming purchased a condemned house and then another, fitting each with barred windows and time-locked steel doors. At length, when he could no longer spread out or up, Lemming delved down, adding cavernous vaults under his houses. He loved to sit in his treasure rooms as in a church. When the subways rumbled beneath, his horde responded in a silver choir. To this monetary hymn the IRS sang their own gleeful counterpoint. Lemming groaned at their assessments, but that was how the nickel flipped. In the tenth year, arrogance growing apace with affluence, he allowed himself an indolent joke at Revenue's expense.

"Look," he condescended graciously, offering the harried tax rep the remains of a Diet Cola. "Instead of auditing all this, just tell me how much the President *needs*. And come on, join me for dinner. McDonalds has a special on small burgers."

The decades paraded stately by in a jingling serenade of profit. Gonville Lemming grew indifferent to the muted sounds above at midnight, grew old with Collector Number Five who was ever punctual, ever precise in report. One Christmas Eve, seized with uncharacteristic Yule spirit, Lemming left an offering in the collection room of last week's meatloaf, yesterday's salad, decaf coffee and a thrift shop card from the cheerful donor commending the loyalty of Number Five.

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He should not have eavesdropped for gratitude. Beyond the door the sentiments were more audible than usual and graphic, their general drift defining Lemming as a mother-groping tightwad sonofabitch who would burn down an orphanage for fun and profit if he wasn't too effing tight to buy matches.

Then poof! — silence and the smell of sweat lingering in the blistered air, ripe as the declined meatloaf.

In his last year of life, during a severe national depression and an odd shortage of hard money, Lemming brought off the coup of an acquisitive lifetime, loaning the government ten billions in ready cash at a mere eighteen point seven percent. The President flinched but signed.

"What's so bad?" Lemming comforted him, retrieving the pen as a memento. "You people pay that much on your plastic."

What the hell, he needed the vault space anyway. He considered allowing the truculent but tireless Number Five to shorten his route, at least skip the less solvent southern states, but thought better of it. Not the money but the principle; next the shlep would want weekends off.

On the eve of his death, Lemming nibbled a day-old pastry and wrote a foreclosure notice on the White House, adding that he might extend their loan if the Pentagon were put at his disposal for coin storage, mints to issue a new Lemming Penny. The tottering government would have no choice but to accept. He sealed the notice and retired in the warm glow of a cup run over, a life full and well applied. He always slept in the Collection room these sunset years, closing his eyes on the sight of the day's haul and opening them to the same comforting vista. This night, with a last loving caress for a roll of quarters, Lemming slept the sleep of the just and never woke.

The first hint of his demise came when he sat up next morning and left his body still supine, cold and stiff. Reaching for money as comfort, his hand simply passed through it.

"The bread's real. You're not," J.B. announced from the second-hand Morris chair as he paged through Lemming's contract now due for execution. "Wakey, wakey, G.L. Number Five has gratefully retired to pasture and pastimes after years of unfailing service to you. On behalf of the Front Office, I hope there's no regret."

From pure habit Lemming could wish for one more good Manhattan sweep. Fun City was always good for a bundle, and he'd planned to make it

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early to the local Army/Navy store for a sale on surplus C-rations. "No, I guess not."

"Good boy. A deal is a deal, right?"

"Did I say it wasn't?" Lemming squared his ectoplasmic shoulders with no more than a sigh for bargains forever lost. "Day for day per agreement."

"Check." J.B.'s hornrims swept over the contract. "Forty-three years, three months, two weeks, and change. Piece of cake, baby. We tried to get you Sundays off, maybe a coffee break now and then, but Number Five said no: *he* didn't get. Always was a kind of a twitch; now he's a pissed off prick." The capped teeth gleamed in a corporate smile. "And fair is fair."

Lemming felt a February chill of premonition, remembering meatloaf and curses. "Who's Number Five?"

The contract vanished into J.B.'s coat pocket. "Sweetie, I'm running behind again, so can we split like now? I gotta sell the American public on a new war with Iraq for God, Country, Mother, and Oil."

Lemming allowed tacitly that he who squeezed the Charmin could surely wring the American heart.

"And you have to learn your route, G.L."

Another chill — late February this time. "Route?"

"Put you in the picture as we go." J.B. invited him to the door which opened of itself on misty limbo. "Today you learn New York, toughest part of your circuit. Hey, I won't blue sky you. You know how many gum wrappers there are in the sewers of New York alone?"

Gum wrappers. The shade of Gonville Lemming emitted a pitiful sound. "Snodgrass..."

"Good old Number Five," J.B. confirmed with institutional reverence. "And I mean he wants it *all*: Cinnaburst, Carefree, Trident, Beeman's, Juicy Fruit, the whole nine yards. Bottom line, sweetie, you won't have time for coffee. He gets Alaska and Hawaii thrown in."

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The New York Public Library just placed Susan Dexter's novel, The Wizard's Shadow, *on their list of 100 recommended books for teens. Her most recent novel,* The Wind-Witch, *just appeared from Del Rey, the company that has published all of her books.* The Wind-Witch *is a sequel to* The Prince of Ill-Luck, *which appeared in March.*

I have a fondness for wizards and magic spells, but most stories rarely do them justice. "Herding Instinct" is a wonderful exception. This story about a sheepdog also balances the otherwise feline focus of the issue.

Herding Instinct

By Susan Dexter

HER MOTHER WAS A SHEEPdog, the pride of her valley — where a good working dog was worth her weight in scarce silver coin. Sheep needed to range far to scour a meal from the steep mountainsides that ringed the valley round, and a shepherd needed legs more tireless than his own to bring a flock back safe to the fold ere darkness fell and wolves were a certainty. Strong and clever was Mai's mother, always guiding her charges home no matter how mountains and weather tested her, and her first litter was eagerly awaited, as if she were a king's wife brought to bed of royal heirs.

Mai was the seventh and the last-born, all of the pups wet and wiggling, looking — and squeaking — quite like rats, save for the splashes of white on their black or brown fur. The litter shared a warm nest of rags by the fireside in the shepherd's tiny hut, shared also their mother's good milk, jostling about to get as much of it and her attention as each could. Mai, forward and bold, was always well fed, her brown and white body plump as a young coney's.

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After a fortnight, six pairs of puppy eyes opened, showed a deep babyish blue color, then settled to a wise brown, the same as their mother's. Mai's eyes, however, opened and remained blue as the inside of an ice cave, paler than the shell of a robin's egg. The shepherd at first feared her blind — then, seeing that notion proved unfounded by her obviously sighted play with her littermates, feared far worse.

Six of the weaned puppies went to new homes after the Market Fair. Mai went for a walk, tagging along behind the shepherd with nary a sheep in sight. They left their valley, followed a river a little way, until they came to a cottage builded of smooth river stones and sticky river mud, thatched with silver-green river rushes. There was a man tending herbs in the dooryard, and the shepherd spoke to him for a while, and showed Mai to him.

"You may be wrong," the wizard Corlinn said gently. "Sometimes a blue-eyed dog simply has blue eyes."

"Her mother had proper brown eyes," the shepherd insisted, twisting his cap in his hands.

"And the father?"

"That's what worries me, sir. Suppose some mountain spirit came upon her — "

The wizard dismissed the superstition, though he did not expect for a moment that the shepherd would follow his will and do likewise. He bent to the puppy, fondled her soft brown ears, which stood tall only to droop over at the tips. She lowered them in pleasure at his notice, and wiggled all over. Unable to long contain such overmastering joy, she sprang up so that Corlinn had to step hastily back, nearly falling, unable to avoid her wet nose and dirty paws. He did evade most of the wet kisses the puppy sought to bestow, to the pup's dismay. She redoubled her efforts.

The shepherd seized her by her ruff, held her down and spoke sternly. The puppy stared past him as if his words had no connection with any world she knew, then struggled to be free of his fingers, not too polite to add teeth to her weapons.

"She's strong-willed — and were she human, a trial to any father!" Corlinn chuckled. "But she's merely a dog. An *ordinary* dog," the wizard stressed.

"You're sure?" Uncertainly. "Sir?"

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Corlinn looked again, with all the Sight he possessed. But though the ice-blue eyes were unusual, even unnerving, they were in no wise demonic. He nodded.

"Will you take her, sir?"

"I?" The wizard transferred his gaze and attention from dog to shepherd with some surprise and no little difficulty. "I have just said, she is only a dog. Even if she were...as you thought...I have neither wish nor need for a familiar. I am in retirement here, and puppies are inconducive to rest and study, whether they be witchbred or not. Take her? No, not likely."

The shepherd nodded and replaced his cap, prepared to go. He snapped his fingers for Mai, who left off sniffing at an herb-plot to frisk back to his side, her earlier scolding forgotten the instant 'twas heard — if it had been heard at all.

"What will you do with her?" the wizard wondered, his tongue taking his ears by surprise. But it could hardly be a bargaining trick — no mention of price had been made.

The shepherd frowned down at the leggy pup, her tail curling over her back and waving gently side to side. "What I'd have done when she was born, if I'd known. 'Tis kinder when they're small."

"*Because of her eyes*?" the wizard asked, a chill of realization striking through. His say that the pup was normal counted for nothing against the weight of peasant lore. "Just because they're *blue*?"

"Because I always cull the weak ones, or the deformed. Same as w' the sheep."

"She's healthy." Protest, as much as observation.

"Aye. And what else besides? I won't foul your river, sir, never fear." The shepherd squared his shoulders, under the fleece he wore for warmth. "There's a fast-running beck nearer to home, 'twill serve."

The puppy spied a butterfly, and bounced stiff-legged to challenge and chase, blissfully unaware of her impending fate.

"Besides, sir, she's got no herding touch," the shepherd explained. "Her mother rounded up the falling leaves, at this age. The rest of her litter couldn't bear to see chair parted from table, but they must herd it back to its place. *This* one — only wants to chase. No use with sheep. No use to anyone."

I have done with familiars, Corlinn thought sternly. *I have no sheep, nor desire a flock. No work for a dog — I will not keep a pet.*

He had not bred the pup. He had not judged her unfit to live. He had

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merely been asked his opinion, and then been ignored. He bore no responsibility — *he* had not sentenced her to death on a superstition, though that sentence had been passed in his hearing. That he *could* alter it did not mean that he *must*. He bore no obligation.

The shepherd snapped his fingers again to call the pup, but she chose to take her leave of Corlinn first, and gazed up at him with those summer-sky eyes, her ears lowered with delight even though he had not acknowledged her, her tail thrashing fiercely, making a breeze.

He cursed himself for every sort of fool, but Corlinn kept her, and kept the name the shepherd's wife had given her: Mai.

Mai might have been enchanted, by the way she grew. Corlinn, who saw her each and every day, took no especial note of the continual small changes — till he realized that when she reared up and put her generally muddy paws on his shoulders, she could very nearly look him in the eye — and he was by no means a stocky man. Any height Mai might have lacked was quite made up by the length of her muzzle — it put her tongue in easy reach of every part of his face, however he twisted to avoid its caress.

When he could hold her at sufficient length to get a proper look at her, Corlinn's eyes beheld a body like a blooded horse's — long and slender, on very long legs. Her coat, neither long nor short, was a pleasant honey-brown color, tipped with black, pied with white irregularly on her legs, throat, chest, and a stripe down the middle of her face. The tip of her ever-waving tail looked as if it had been dipped in a paint-pot. One large ear stayed mostly erect, whilst the other often flew gaily off to one side, and both flicked to follow every sound, missing nothing. Mai looked nothing like a mountain sheepdog. She was, in every part, as exotic as her eyes.

Mai was fond of racing about the cottage in an excess of high spirits, as if fiends were on her track, her back humped and all of her paws briefly occupying the selfsame spot, sliding wildly on the polished dirt as she turned. Her speed dazzled as much as it distressed — Corlinn was often not in time to rescue some bottle or pot from disaster because he could not imagine it even remotely to be in danger. He thought to banish the creature from the cottage — a dog should be kenneled outside anyway. Mai howled till he did not know which of them he pitied the more. Corlinn steeled himself to ignore her noise, which would surely cease when she resigned herself to her fate. The

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howling did not abate. It grew frenzied, hysterical. Scrabbling sounds joined it. Sleep was impossible. Corlinn relented, and opened the door. Mai tumbled in. The face of the door was scarred from her frantic attempts to gain entry. It looked as if a bear had been at it. She fell asleep at his feet, all innocence and having quite forgiven him for locking her out.

Such peace was a rare novelty. Mai enjoyed dragging Corlinn's cloak to the floor, to lie upon — and to chew the hem out of, so that he discovered the garment soggy and ripped, shoved under the bedstead. He reprimanded the puppy sternly — and often. But if she could not obtain the cherished cloak, Mai was happy to chew on his books — removing them carefully from the shelves first, while she selected the most toothsome among them. Height was no obstacle, not to Mai. Corlinn's boots also suffered, were pocked by teeth. The dog found the tended earth of the herb garden ideal for crafting holes — a practice Corlinn generally discovered when, wondering why Mai had left him untroubled for an hour's space, he stepped outdoors and literally stumbled upon the destruction. He forbade her to sleep on his bed, yet there each dawning was Mai, crept stealthily in after he had dropped off, curled at his back. As she grew, she took a larger share of bed and blanket, heedlessly.

Then, she began to wander. To the river, where she learned to swim by leaping dauntlessly into the water — frightening the pike Corlinn was clumsily attempting to lure into his fish-weir. Into the woods — where she found smelly things without number, to be rolled in, their stench fetched proudly home like a trophy. If she found naught else, there was always mud — Mai would come home covered with it, ears to paws, and share out her bounty gladly with a clean cloak or bedcover.

All these things distressed, but what Corlinn minded most was her nose, thrust suddenly and coldly into his ribs or the side of his elbow while he was peaceably engaged in his studies. Always it startled him, sometimes he actually shouted. Several times he was minded to return the blow, no matter that Mai meant it only as a friendly greeting, or a request for his attention. He forbore, mostly, because his guilt afterward much eclipsed any fleeting satisfaction got from his churlish behavior.

Corlinn told himself that Mai was older every day — that surely matters would change for the better by the end of the coming winter, when she would be more mature, more settled. But it remained true that he had retreated to this lonely spot because it *was* lonely. He had not desired company, even a

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dog's, and there were many times he heartily wished he had let the shepherd take Mai away, to whatever fate would have been hers. Cats, owls, snakes — *those* were the proper familiars for a wizard who desired the advantage of their link to animal wisdom — not a feckless, enthusiastic, reckless puppy. In short, Corlinn remembered that he had never wanted a dog, and chose to forget why his heart had softened.

As all dogs will, Mai from time to time looked at things that were not there — especially when winter's shrill winds blew. Corlinn knew this was no sign of magic — he was with her each day, every night. Mai was a bright dog, a demanding one, willful as any father-coddled princess, but she carried no taint of the extraordinary. Her blue eyes, once one was accustomed to them, were simply blue, unusual by no more than their hue. They saw what any dog saw — which was not much. Dogs relied upon keen noses, above sight. And ears, which explained her attention to the wind.

By the mid of winter, the wizard was wondering why it had not occurred to him earlier to simply apply his arts to the puppy — it would be a small thing to change blue eyes to common brown for a week or two, and trade her to some herder in need of a good dog. A flock of sheep to look after would settle her in short order, keep her too busy for mischief. He would, of course, need to take her a valley or two away, lest Mai be traced back to him when the spell faded and her eyes were blue once more. That required that he wait for a break in the weather, a reliable week or two in which to travel. Mai, who looked up in surprise from uprooting a potted chive clump when he shouted, was all unwitting of her future. No, those blue eyes did not gift a special sight.

RUNNING water is a bane to wizards, for even the mightiest of them dare cross its unbridled power only at great peril. Thus had Corlinn sited his cottage where he did — the river was as good as a wall at his back, in case of sorcerous attack. Likewise the water-smoothed stones, the river mud and rushes he had used to build his home — washed so long by the flowing water, they retained its properties to the extent that no ill-wish could work harm upon them. It stood to reason, he had never been across the unbridged river.

Winters in the backlands seemed harsher than those of the tamed city — the swift-running river froze right over, shore to shore, thick enough that the deer could be seen crossing upon the ice, fearlessly. Mai also ran out eagerly

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upon the solid surface, uncaring about the cold, unheeding of the icy water rushing two feet below, mindlessly happy to extend her range of mischief. Corlinn was never tempted to such recklessness, himself. He walked — well bundled — along the shore, admiring the patterns of ice and snow, the many shades of white and gray, the rare blue that was a match for Mai's eyes, till his cheeks burned and his toes ached with cold. Then he turned homeward.

As the season began to wane, the days to lengthen ever so slightly, he tramped with a purpose, seeking signs of the first blossom of the skunk cabbage on the low ground by the river. The plants not only survived the snow — they actually managed to flower through the last drifts, generating heat enough to melt their way into the sunlight. Corlinn made use of that property each year, to succor delicate herbs he had brought from the City, plants unable to bear the disturbance of indoor potting but too tender to withstand the snows they struggled to sprout through. He looked eagerly for the unlovely flowers, anxious to bank his plants with them for a critical few days.

The winter creaked to a close — literally. The river ice began to groan faintly in the morning, the sound waxing as the day and the sunlight grew. The noise abated only a trifle in the night — and suddenly there was a rumble like distant thunder which shook the wizard from his sleep — and he knew the released river was rushing past his house, its water studded with chunks of ice, spilling down the floodplain as it did with every spring thaw. Mai startled at the sound — he gave her a reassuring pat before remembering to forbid her the bed. Corlinn returned peacefully to his slumbers — he had built his home on safe ground, above the water's reach even at this season.

The morning was misty, the air a fog that rose from the warming banks of snow, the sky above overcast and admitting no visible rays of sun, though letting its heat through. Corlinn went out early — with Mai nosing eagerly ahead — to see whether damage had been done to the riverbanks. The air smelled faintly of skunk cabbage.

The wraith always appeared in this very early spring, so Corlinn was not surprised to see the pale figure drifting along the far shore, among the gray trees. One day she would linger, two at most, always at the wane of the moon, clutching her bundle to her. Once, he had heard a thin cry come over the water, which told him much — a woman and her baby, both dead in childbirth, wandering until they reached the running water of the river, which no shade could cross. They must have died at this season, unguessably

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long ago. The woman unwed, the babe fatherless, abandoned and condemned to walk for a short time each year, each spring. Corlinn spared the wraith a touch of pity, but he had no remedy to offer. If only she could once manage to appear *before* the ice broke up — but always she was too late, often by a week or two, most poignantly by a mere few hours, as this year.

Mai was questing along the water's edge, barking at the floating ice, sniffing at rocks turned over by the flood, digging into any soft spots she managed to find. She began to roll on some small object — she must have found a dead fish, swept along and cast ashore. It would be too fresh and too cold to have ripened fully enough to suit her, but Mai persisted. Corlinn sighed, and wondered if he could get himself indoors without her noticing, bar the portal so she'd have to remain out in the air a while. Or would she only find more dirt? Had frozen mud begun to thaw?

Halfway to his doorstep, he paused to see whether she was noticing him. Mai was not — she was by the water, on her feet, staring across at the far side. Doubtless she regretted those woodlands now beyond her reach — or would she attempt swimming across? Corlinn hoped she would not — the water still carried a freight of ice, and she would take herself into a danger he could not save her from. Perhaps he should call her to him —

She was watching the wraith, Corlinn realized with a start. He had no notion just *what* she saw, but her attention was directed rather obviously. She stalked stiff-legged toward the water, her gaze never shifting.

Reaching the cold water, the dog did not halt, but began to trot back and forth, anxiously. Still, she looked across the stream, into the bare woodland. Once she looked back over her shoulder at Corlinn, her blue eyes startling even at a fair distance. He waved to her, and called her name, but Mai stayed by the riverside.

From the shore, Mai watched the white chunks of ice bobbing in the black water, scattering and milling, separated from one another. That was wrong, should not be. She barked at the white shapes, but they did not heed her.

No wayward sheep had ever successfully defied Mai's mother. Mai was — blue eyes or not — her mother's true daughter. She lowered her head, stretched her neck out, and stalked in a half-crouch toward the fractious river. She speared the nearest ice chunk with her winter-blue gaze. She did not

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growl, nor bare a fang, but with her whole posture she threatened the disordered flock of ice floes.

A small block — which had been sweeping toward the gravelly shore — shuddered to a sudden halt. Another block bumped it, jammed against it, was also halted. In an instant more the whole surface of the river had done likewise, as the reaction spread from one shore to the other. The ice was smooth and flat no longer, and there remained a gap or two, through which running black water could be glimpsed — but most of the flow was covered by piled-up chunks of ice, held in their places by Mai's commanding sheepdog stare.

Corlinn looked wide-eyed at the scene. Mai waved her white-tipped tail once — not at him, but in signal to the opposite shore. And an insubstantial white figure set a hesitant foot upon the nearest block.

Apparently the rough surface was solid enough. The wraith flitted across, quick as a breeze, almost as difficult to make out. It passed within a yard of Mai, who shook her fur and let all the ice go skittering on its way, in a second, smaller flood of released water. Leaping back from the slopping bank, the dog pointed her long nose toward the nearer woods, a little way downstream.

Corlinn looked that way too — and the hair rose prickling on the nape of his neck. A second pale wraith stood among the bare tree trunks, where he had never seen a sign of one ere this. A thicker white form, with a suggestion — faint and best seen out of the corner of the eye, hard to make out dead-on — of a shield and a sword. A soldier, dead in some long ago battle.

Dead, and unable to wed his sweetheart, or claim his child. Separated from them forever by running water...

As Corlinn stared, the slender white form rushed toward the heavier one, was enfolded in it. Just for an instant, the little flock was gathered all together, as it should be. Then, 'twas gone. The sun ate through the fog, and the river water began to sparkle, the white ice became impossible to gaze upon. His eyes watered.

Mai came romping out of the dazzle, unseen, and leaped up to plant her paws on Corlinn's shoulders. She did stink of dead fish — Corlinn found he did not care. He hugged her tight to him. Mai wriggled to be free of his grip, but her warm tongue found his cheek, twice.

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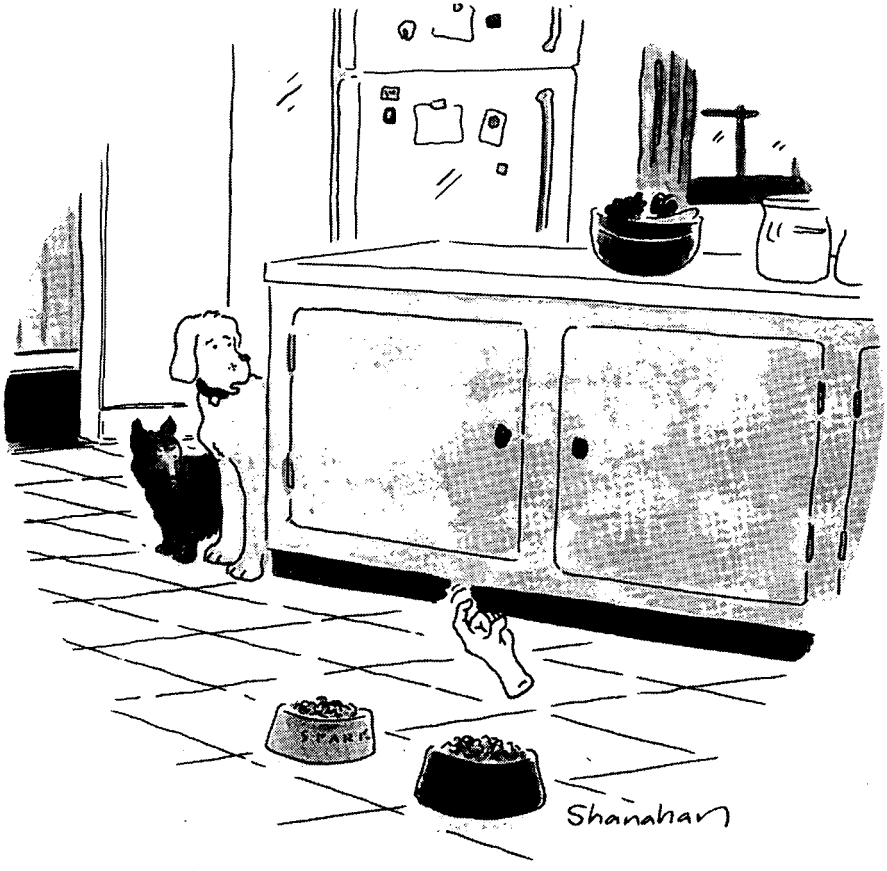
"Sometimes a blue-eyed dog is just a blue-eyed dog," the wizard recalled, grunting as the dog poked her overlong nose into his left armpit, trying to persuade him to lift the arm and put it to use scratching her. "With no herding instinct. And sometimes a wizard is simply wrong."

Yes, Mai agreed.



"Still, it is the hand that feeds us."

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

IN THE SHADOWLAND OF THE HOLLYWOOD BIOPIC

AN OLD DEVIL advises his callow demon nephew, in C.S. Lewis's classic of popular theology, *The Screwtape Letters* (1943), on how to best bamboozle a gullible earthling. Keep him from serious thought and reasoned discourse, and instead catch him up in "the stream of immediate sense experiences," writes Screwtape to Wormwood. "Teach him to call it 'real life' and don't let him ask what he means by 'real.'"

Now, far be it from me to imply that Hollywood is the domain of devils. Yet a very similar brand of wise counsel is, judging from the product produced, passed down from generation to generation of studio screenwriters and directors. And the tainted realism of Hollywood is nowhere more evident than in the beloved "biopic."

Biographical pictures have been a staple of the screen industry from its very beginnings. And they've been stretching — beyond recognition — the truth in their true stories from the start. A personal favorite of mine is the 1946 film bio of composer Cole Porter. *Night and Day* was directed by Michael Curtiz, starred the ever-scrumptious Cary Grant, and was loaded with the glorious music of America's greatest songsmith.

Porter's long struggle with disabling injuries and unrelenting pain is fully exploited by the film. (After all, the brave triumph over a health challenge — even if the triumph consists of a luminescent deathbed scene accompanied by the swells of 101 violins — is an almost requisite biopic plot device.) It is the great composer's romantic life about which the movie is considerably less than frank.

In *Night and Day*, Porter's romantic torments all involve women — especially his wife, Linda (Alexis

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Smith). The film succeeds in conveniently ignoring a key fact of its subject's life: Cole Porter was gay. Porter, who cooperated fully in the making of the movie, supported this convenient (and during that time period, imperative) fiction. But, understandable or not, that essential falsehood completely compromised all that was "real" in his "real life" story.

The biopic has always heightened the dramatic, while simplifying the complexities of one human existence into a basic storyline (capable of being told in two hours). The cleverest streamlining serves, as it did in *Night and Day*, an added purpose: it tidies away the inconvenient aspects of a man or woman's life.

A saintly patina is the goal. (As though we couldn't relate to the imperfect tangle of truth.) And that has changed very little over the years, even though today's biopic subjects — men like Malcolm X and Jimmy Hoffa — are, perhaps, less innately angelic than a Jennifer Jones doing a glow-in-the-dark turn in *The Song of Bernadette* (1943).

Dickie Attenborough (a.k.a. Lord Attenborough of Richmond-upon-Thames) is one of the leading lights of the modern biopic. The majority of his directorial projects have been screen biographies. His films include *Young Winston* (1972), *Gandhi* (1982), *Cry Freedom* (1987), and *Chaplin* (1992).

Attenborough makes impressive biopics, but he is often less than subtle with his material. Picture a wooden saint statue, suffused in the brilliant rainbow light of a stained-glass window, while the sweet faces of the Vienna Boys' Choir look on, singing an angelic hosannah, and you just about have my impression of an Attenborough film biography.

The Academy Award-winning *Gandhi* almost loses the man in his epic setting, while *Cry Freedom* focuses on the wrong man. (Instead of telling the story of murdered black South African leader, Steve Biko, outright, the film — written by John Briley, who also wrote *Gandhi* — tells his story through the filter of the life of a white journalist named Donald Woods. Biko remains a rather obscure martyr.)

Charlie Chaplin remains a bit of a cipher at the end of his screen biography, as well. Attenborough's genuinely affectionate (yet far too episodic) biography — this time written by William Boyd, Bryan Forbes and William Goldman — is definitely attempting the deification of a less than holy man. That is their greatest disservice to him.

Attenborough and his writers are

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at such pains to deny the label "communist" that drove the brilliant Chaplin out of America in 1952, that they paint him as practically apolitical. He *was* a leftist, who supported progressive, anti-fascist causes in the film industry and in society at large. (How can anyone who has seen his films doubt this?.... But, alas, shockingly few people born since the McCarthy era have seen Chaplin's films.)

Like homosexuality, pink politics are apparently an inconvenient, dirty little secret, best swept underneath the nearest rug. Therefore, *Chaplin* ignores the title character's social conscience, just as it downplays his sexual peccadillos with the sweet-sixteen set.

Selective memory no doubt makes for a more generally acceptable film, but it doesn't make for the most truthful or compelling portraiture. When you offend no one, you'll enlighten precious few.

Trying to pussyfoot around the passion and politics of Charlie Chaplin proved too exhausting for Attenborough. The Tramp's alter ego may have been — and I believe that he was — an artistic genius touched with greatness, but a plaster saint he wasn't. Perhaps that's why Dickie picked Clive Staples Lewis as his next biopic subject. One of the foremost lay Christian apologists of the twentieth century (as well as a respected writer of science fiction, for his "Space" Trilogy, and children's fantasy, for his Narnia Chronicles), C.S. Lewis is the kind of mild-mannered and devout Oxford don who looks like he was built for a halo.

And Attenborough is happy enough to attach one to Lewis's balding head, in a "real life" story that contains the added bonus of true love and tragic death. The story is *Shadowlands*, and it was just waiting for Richard Attenborough's lush cinematic treatment. However, the story wasn't languishing on a shelf somewhere.

The film's writer, William Nicholson, has been working this material for almost a decade. In 1985, BBC Wales produced Nicholson's first screen adaptation of the late-in-life love story of C. S. Lewis and Joy Davidman. It was called *Shadowlands* (although the American videotape of the BBC production currently available is entitled *C.S. Lewis Shadowlands*). Later, he adapted the screenplay for the stage. *Shadowlands* premiered in London in 1989, and came to Broadway the following year (where Nigel Hawthorne received a Tony for his portrayal of Lewis). The play has been produced in nine countries.

Seldom has a playwright gotten

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so much mileage from a single tale. You might think that Shadowlands would only improve with age and the experience of multiple productions. If you think that, then you don't know Hollywood. Or Richard Attenborough, either, for that matter. For I am sad to say that when it comes to telling a biographical story, Richard Attenborough's production of *Shadowlands* is far from an improvement over Nicholson's 1985 BBC treatment.

Major motion pictures are, you may have noticed, actually frightened of containing too many words. So Attenborough's feature film has much less dialogue than the BBC telefilm. This allowed for many more shots of the dreamy spires of Oxford and the verdant hills of Jolly Old England.

Don't get me wrong, I loved all the beautiful scenery in *Shadowlands*. And Roger Pratt (*Batman, The Fisher King, Brazil*), Attenborough's director of photography, is one of the best cinematographers around. He can shoot my travelogue any day. But *Shadowlands* isn't a travelogue. It's a biopic. And what frustrated me about the movie was that every time I saw one of Pratt's picture postcards brought to life, I realized that some bit of dialogue or character exposition must have been blue-penciled right out of the script.

The bare-bones storyline of *Shadowlands* can be stated quickly enough: C. S. Lewis (Anthony Hopkins), who is called Jack by his friends, is a confirmed bachelor in his mid-50's, who lives with his even more confirmed bachelor brother, Warnie (Edward Hardwicke). The pair lead a quiet life of scholarship, until an American fan of Jack's, a Jewish Christian convert and former Communist Party member named Joy Gresham (Debra Winger), comes to Oxford and turns their staid existence upside down.

Joy becomes Jack's friend, later his "technicality" wife. But it is only after she is diagnosed with terminal cancer that Lewis is able to admit that he loves the woman. They marry again in a religious ceremony, are happy for a time when Joy goes into remission. Then she dies.

This is the story that Nicholson and Attenborough tell. And those who come to the movie with no prior knowledge of Lewis or his September bride will probably say: "By gum, this story's got it all!" They'll sigh over the lovely locales. They'll have a three hanky cry over Winger's dying swan. (Nobody can fade and expire better than Ms. Winger, as we already learned in *Terms of Endear-*

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ment. If they ever do a remake of *Camille*, they've got their gal.) They'll marvel at Hopkins in his best performance yet. (No one can play British repression as well as Hopkins — all gentle calm, but with the spectrum of sweet and bitter emotions just barely held in check. And Lewis, unlike the butler in *Remains of the Day*, gives Tony Hopkins a chance to finally lay bare all those hidden feelings.)

But for those who know something about this "real life" story, Attenborough's *Shadowlands* will likely fail to satisfy. What's missing? Lots. And what you miss will vary according to who you are.

SF and fantasy fans will likely wish for a little coverage on that impressive literary roundtable, the Inklings. J.R.R. Tolkien was a close personal friend of Lewis prior to his marriage. You'd never know it from this movie. Tolkien does not appear at all. (And so the film does not touch on the intriguing aspects of Lewis and Tolkien's estrangement after Joy came into the picture.) The other Inklings also do not appear. Instead the screenplay substitutes some generic academic cronies who occasionally tease Jack over a pint of bitters.

Christian viewers will likely be astounded by how non-religious the movie's Lewis is. Although he speaks publicly of theology on radio and from lecterns, it's the same warn-out speech over and over (because it foreshadows Lewis's later grief). You'd never know this fellow was a deeply religious man who published widely in theology. When, late in the movie, Hopkins prays over the dying Winger, it sounds more like a deathbed conversion than the prayer of a man who talked to his God daily and at length.

Yes, friends, in a Hollywood biopic, devout religion is like homosexuality and communism — something you don't want to acknowledge too openly. Okay, so not everyone is a Protestant Christian. I'm not, either. But that shouldn't matter. What matters is that religion is a crucial part of who C.S. Lewis is. (Heck, even his science fiction and his children's fantasies are extended Christian allegories.)

Now let me say a little something about what peeved me most about *Shadowlands* as a woman and a feminist. I did not appreciate how Joy Davidman was dismissed to secondary status by Attenborough's *Shadowlands*. This is something Dickie has consistently done over the years to his female characters, as he told the story of man after man. But this is different. *Shadowlands* isn't just about Lewis. It's the story of

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a marriage between a man and a woman. It is a celebration of the deep, abiding love that can come out of friendship and mutual respect.

But we know next to nothing about the female half of this love story. (It seems to be enough that she was a love object who sickened and died.) In a sense, we don't even know this woman's name. The film refers to her consistently as Mrs. Gresham. But the divorced Mrs. Gresham was a professional writer who wrote under her own name, Joy *Davidman*.

Viewers of *Shadowlands* get little sense of Joy Davidman as an intellectual. The film admits that she's written some poetry, but makes it an almost shame-faced, amateurish thing. (The same attitude the film takes toward her years as a communist activist.) Davidman was, in fact, a Yale Younger Poet. She was also the author of two novels. She was an editor, an anthologist, and a working journalist. (In addition, she was not only a respected film critic for *The New Masses*, she was also — for a short period of time — a contract screenwriter for MGM.) After converting to Christianity, she was even a lay theologian who wrote a book analyzing the ten commandments for modern readers.

Those who watch Debra Winger's Joy are told nothing of any of this. They see only an eager, rather crass, younger woman — a literary groupie, almost — whose in-yo-face pursuit of Lewis gets him to loosen up. Oh, she's nice, but she is not the intellectual equal of Jack Lewis. In "real life," she was.

There is not enough room in this column to list all of the countless sins of omission and distortion this movie commits. I'm willing to forgive many. If Nicholson wants it to be Jack on the line when Joy runs to answer the phone and collapses, instead of her friend, Katherine Farrer (as it was in "real life"), I'll call it artistic license and let it go. But where does he get off completely editing out one of Joy's children?

In the movie, much is made of Joy's sensitive little son, Douglas (Joseph Mazzello), who is but a wee lad when his mother dies. In real life, Douglas was a teenager when his mother died. And he had — still has — a brother, David, a year older. I wonder how David Gresham feels about being edited out of the events of his own life for what Douglas told *People* were "dramatic reasons."

Shadowlands is, I think, Richard Attenborough's best film. For once, he keeps his story intimate. He has fashioned a moving film that is unabashedly sentimental, but never mawkish. The movie's message is

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affirming, the scenery is gorgeous, and the acting is first-rate.

So, what's the gripe? Shouldn't a Hollywood movie be allowed to stand on its own and be judged solely on its value as art and/or entertainment? Usually. The one exception is the biopic. A biographical movie is not fiction out of whole cloth. It tells the story of real people and "real life." And real people deserve care and honesty in the telling of their stories.

With all respect to his Abysmal Sublimity Under Secretary Screwtape, I think it's time for moviegoers to take a long, hard look at the biopic. And it's time to ask the feature film industry exactly what they mean by "real" when they sell us a two hour excursion into somebody's "real life."

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Ace Books just published Esther M. Friesner's fantasy novel Majyk by Design. *She caused quite a stir with her last appearance in* F&SF, *the July cover story, "Jesus at the Bat." She returns with a tale about strange rituals in foreign lands.*

Esther wishes to thank Terry Pratchett and Heather Wood who gave her "so much help with matters British and lustful vicars. Terry said he always wanted to see a village named Straddle-upon-Truss. It was the least I could do."

A Beltaine and Suspenders

By Esther M. Friesner

"I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU say, Olivia; it's no natural place." John Herrick, Vicar of Staddle-upon-Truss, dashed the papers onto the pew beside him and lifted his well-chiseled chin in a manner straight out of the more popular female romances. To the casual observer, Father Herrick did not seem a typical servant of the Lord, unless it were Lord Byron.

"You dropped one," said Telemachus Battle-Purfitt, frantically wiggling long, pale fingers at the errant sheet.

The vicar retrieved the page and gave it a superficial glance. "Oh, that's merely a copy of an especially intriguing passage from the Stilby-Nash. You may have it for your records, if you like. I've the original." He offered it to Telemachus.

"No, no thanks, nonono, not to bother." Telemachus fairly gasped out the words, backpedaling swiftly until his shoulders were nearly pressed flat against the bizarre mural on the parish church wall which he had been at such pains to uncover and restore for these past seven months. Flakes of plaster

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clung to his jacket and blobs of freshly applied tempera stained his cuffs, but it did not seem to matter to him so much as his successful escape from accepting the vicar's paper.

"Do give it up, Father John," said Olivia Drummond in her clear, capable voice. In heavy walking tweeds and thick brogues, she lounged against another pew as if she were the squire of some rural seat come to exercise political bonhomie by mixing with the locals at the pub. "He won't touch a thing that's been on the floor, even if it is a consecrated one. You know our Tilly and germs."

A weak smile fairly doubled over Telemachus' meagre-fleshed face. "Just a precaution," he quavered, scampering back up the scaffolding to the safety of his scrapers and palette knives. "Mummy says one never knows, especially after all those London mites trampling through the house."

Father Herrick stacked his papers smartly. "I don't know why your mother ever agreed to take in so many city kids during the Blitz, old boy. Not if it was half the strain you paint it."

A spark of alien fire kindled in Telemachus' shallow blue eyes, a fugitive bolt of gumption striking his book-curved spine abruptly stiff. "Whatever her personal feelings in the matter, Mummy has never been known to shirk the performance of her duty."

"Too right." Olivia laughed until her skinny shoulders shook beneath their burden of woven wool. "England expects, but Lady Battle-Purfitt forestalls. Oh, *don't* look at me that way, Tilly! You know I'd die before disdaining your sainted mummy's devotion to what's expected of her in this world. In fact, I'd give a good deal to meet her. Admirable woman. She saved those poor little guttersnipes from the German bombs all the same, whether she did it out of Christian charity or because it went with the image of lady of the manor."

"They were just so...unsanitary." Telemachus shuddered. He daubed at a badly faded section of the mural with a camel's hair brush. "So precocious, too."

"*Don't* tell us again about how your mother caught a pair of them making the beast with two backs in the pergola." Olivia strolled up to the scaffolding and rested an elbow on the wooden frame. Telemachus gave a small squawk to feel the timbers shake ever so slightly and Olivia desisted.

"How could they?" Telemachus shook his head, patting his bedewed

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brow dry with a folded pocket handkerchief. "They were only infants!" A hot flush overwhelmed his sallow cheeks. "And I do *not* wish to discuss such — such *carnal* matters while we are under this sacred roof!"

"Don't fret about Miss Drummond's choice of language for my sake, Telemachus," the vicar replied with a superior chuckle. "I am quite understanding, even if the Church is not. Back to the soil. It always proves to be too much for your urbanized souls, no matter the age. The ancient fertility of the land. The Great Mother's siren song. I'm not at all surprised. Your neck of the woods is rife with nodes of chthonic power, Telemachus. Doesn't a day go by that some young sprig of a folklorist isn't discovering a strangely isolated village in the hinterlands whose inhabitants still cling stubbornly to the Old Religion, bound to the earth by more than a tenant's agreement, serving arcane and ageless deities, worshipping the fructifying forces in ways that aren't quite C. of E." He lifted one corner of his perfect lips in a knowledgeable smile. "Don't look so altogether scandalized; it's only good business practice to familiarize oneself with the competition."

"Oh, for pity's sake!" Exasperation made Olivia's cheesy complexion acquire just the hint of color along the hatchet-blades of her cheeks. "The Great Mother had no more to do with it than *my* mother. These so-called 'kids' Tilly's mum caught having it off in the pergola were a hot young village stallion of about twenty and the sixteen-year-old sis of one of the Blitz babies. She had dugs like a pair of V-1's and the morals of a Corn Goddess! Lady Battle-Purfitt doused the pair of them with the contents of her watering can, hauled them off to the village church, and stood guard over 'em with a loaded reticule until the banns were read and they were safely married." She strode the length of the nave like Nelson traversing the deck of the Victory, then added, "Besides, Kingsfield-on-Ouse is hardly the fertility-mad hinterland you're so daft for. It's in Sussex!"

Father Herrick's classically handsome face remained impassive. "So is this other village I've been talking about. Lies within hailing distance of Kingsfield, as a matter of fact, in a thickly forested part of the mountains, or so my sources say."

"Mountains?" Olivia echoed, her voice pitching itself all the higher to reflect her outright skepticism. She threw herself into the pew beside Father Herrick and slapped the velvet cushions until dust motes streamed skyward. "Mountains in Sussex? Really, Vicar, next you'll be speaking of French

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modesty and American etiquette."

"Mountains." Father Herrick remained firm. "I said it was no natural place, did I not? Yes, mountains, and bristling with the ageless, bearded giants of the wildwood such as have not been seen on our shores since the misty dawning of the Druids' reign."

"Druids did *not* ever reign. You know as well as I that they were teachers, healers, advisors to the chieftains — "

"Olivia, it was a trifle of poetic exaggeration on my part, no more," Father Herrick replied.

"Like the mountains?" she countered archly.

He sighed. "You've no use for romance, do you?"

Olivia's raucous laugh had a barking undertone that had temporarily cleared the church steeple of its resident family of ravens many times before this. "Rubbish," she said in brief. "Which is the sum of my opinion concerning *this*." With a jab of her brittle fingernail she skewered the slim pamphlet presently lying dead-center between the two of them on the musty pew.

It was not a very prepossessing example of the printer's art, to be sure. Its creamy paper was covered with a chainmail of rings left by the damp bottoms of uncounted pint measures. In places these careless attentions had caused the ink to run, yet one could still easily read the words, *A Monograph Inquiring into the Obscure Ritual Practices and Beliefs of Greater Ambrose Surlesard, with Special Reference to the Mayday Cycle of Forbidden Rites, by Lord William Stilby-Nash, 1848.*

Gently Father Herrick rescued the document from Olivia's impalement. "Then I take it you decline to accompany me."

"What? And miss seeing mountains in *Sussex?*" Olivia chuckled, a marginally sweeter sound than her abrasive laugh. Then she turned suddenly serious. "Look, Vicar, I still don't believe the natter you've dished out about finding this little gem of the printer's art in a barrow on Portobello Road last Sunday fortnight, but if you're willing to lay yourself open to the finger of scorn by mounting an expedition to Greater Whatsis, who am I to pass up the opportunity for a bit of an excursion? I'm at least as keen a preservationist and scholar of old folkways as yourself, although without half your opportunities for publication."

"And here I thought you did the work for love, Miss Drummond," the

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vicar remarked with rather a nasty insinuating tone. What it was specifically intended to insinuate remained a mystery, but it was unarguably nasty.

"I think you *ought* to come with us, Miss Drummond," Telemachus put in, none too boldly. "Certainly after all you've contributed to the interpretation of the mural. There *is* a connection to be discovered, I feel it."

"Perhaps," said Olivia, pushing off from the pew and lunging back for the wall where the mural waited. It was just such a land-devouring stride that had brought her afoot down from London to Staddle-upon-Truss, solely on the casual comment of a friend who was, like Olivia, a spinster of independent means who filled her life with the holy mission of seeking out and salvaging her nation's fading native traditions.

"Oh, look, a letter from Tilly," Rowena had said, holding the onionskin inches from her nose. "His pa and mine used to go up to Scotland together to do horrid things to salmon. You'd probably like him, Livvie. Tolerate him, anyway. He's clear mad on the old musty-dusties, too, and he writes that he's found *something* worth nosing into in the old church at Staddle. Won't say what, the mean creature."

That had been enough for Olivia, and she had set off. The *something* proved to be the wall painting, which she found Telemachus Battle-Purfitt in the throes of restoring to its original brilliance. Father John Herrick was in splendid attendance, digging up a wealth of documents and making frequent researching forays to Oxford, Cambridge, and London while his milk-blooded curate tended to the spiritual health of the Staddlefolk.

Olivia was immediately fascinated by what she saw. Being Olivia, she immediately presented her credentials as an amateur student of old folkways and preservationist of endangered cultural treasures. Her privately printed collection, *Neglected Stirpicultural Carols of Yorkshire*, so impressed the Ladies' Altar Guild that there was no need for her to follow it up by flourishing *Evoe, Aristaeus!: An Inquiry into Certain Chthonic Rites in Somerset Apiculture*. Mrs. Threadneedle, the chairwoman, made haste to admit her to the work site and even went so far as to mention her interest to the vicar.

They formed an unlikely triptych, those three — the aging bluestocking, the dapper vicar, and the skittish æsthete — but at heart they were all cut from the same clay. The ancient folkways of England called to them, albeit the call came ever more and more faintly since the war, as the plowlands grew depleted of their young blood and the new generation swarmed over the cities

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"It reminds me of an infestation of newts we once suffered through at the vicarage, before we got piped water."

instead. From village to village Olivia Drummond traveled, grim as death with a hangnail, ruthlessly hunting down the *sui generis* ram-gelding song, the rare swan-upping work-chant, the dotty Oldest Inhabitant who, for a pint or two (or seven), might be persuaded to relate a venerable cradle tale that began, "Arrrh, them wunt go far enoo tha' wheels, but th' piskies did frummish 'um t'be 'is gawthmodder's cat an' britches."

Olivia had to admit, helping out on this church mural project was rather more restful and just as fulfilling as jotting down dialect-and-spit-encrusted ramblings. Telemachus was the only one to touch the painting itself, but as more and more of the work came to light he graciously permitted Olivia and the vicar to have a hand in interpreting the inscriptions.

"It still reminds me of the Bayeux Tapestry," she remarked, looking up at the section which was completely restored. It was an understandable association to make. The figures of men, women, and angels were all done in the Norman style, long-fingered hands cupped as if to catch the words scrolling from their mouths. At their feet and over their heads were creatures divine and diabolical, grotesques and fancies of the artist's mind, most of these scaled and crawling.

"It reminds *me* of an infestation of newts we once suffered through at the vicarage, before we got piped water," said Father Herrick. "Look, even the ones in the sky are just so many salamanders with wings."

"Do you think — " Telemachus stammered, " — do you think they might be dragons?"

The vicar sniffed. "Fairly pitiful dragons, if so. But quite in keeping with my theory concerning Greater Ambrose. Look here, Miss Drummond — " he rose and approached the mural, picking up a slender lathe with which to indicate those points to which he referred. "Your Latin is almost as good as mine, and Telemachus took a First in Classics at Oxford. We all came up with the same translation, did we not?" He aimed the lathe at a banner of text running along the lower edge of the painting.

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"'Here Saint Augustine departs from Estadium, having converted many,'" Olivia read once more. "That would be Staddle, I'd expect. 'Here Saint Augustine returns to Estadium, to warn the people. Here Saint Augustine relates much of how he came to Ambrosius Magnus, and of the evil rites, and of the lizards.' Hmm. Augustine may have done a bangup job of converting the Angles, but this just sounds like he was a failed Saint Patrick. Must've run into a plague of reptiles — one of my Wiltshire informants told me he remembered something like that during spring thaw in the Jubilee year, although there were precious few times that old geezer *wasn't* seeing snakes. When Augustine couldn't drive 'em off, rather than admit it was due to some lacking of holy worth on his part and queering the whole conversion assignment, he spread scurrilous stories about the hamlet in question. Pretty good stories, if the folk here thought enough of 'em to immortalize the incident on the church wall."

"But don't you *see*, Miss Drummond?" Father Herrick rapped his lathe so vigorously against the wall that it snapped. Poor Telemachus yelped and scurried down to check his precious painting for damage. "Saint Augustine did *not* prevaricate! The connection is all here: the unnatural rites, the overwhelming representation of a reptilian presence such as has been bag and baggage of all self-respecting fertility cults since time began, the specific reference to lizards. The linguistic clues could not be more blatant. And this mural is documentary evidence that the arcane practices of Greater Ambrose Surlesard were old even when Duke William the Bastard's reign over England was young! When we speak of Saint Augustine's conversion of the Angles, we are speaking of the sixth century!"

"So we are." Olivia thrust her hands into the pockets of her Norfolk jacket. "I still don't see that we're speaking of survivals of antique fertility rites in the Sussex *mountains*!"

Telemachus looked up from where he had been frantically retouching the results of the vicar's too-emphatic nature. "But — but that's what we might discover if we make the journey. I'm certain Mummy wouldn't mind us popping by for a visit. If I wire her first. Short notice, but — but I don't think she'd — I'll do it as soon as I may. She ought to be expecting me, it being so close to Christmas, and the festive season should — should smooth the way clear for you two to join me. It — " here he crept back toward the abandoned pew and brought his own finger perilously close to the monograph " — it does

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say that the author spent a night in Kingsfield before proceeding to Greater Ambrose."

"It doesn't say how much he drank that night," Olivia jibed. "If we err and under-imbibe I'm afraid we won't be able to see Greater Ambrose at all. But never mind, I'm game. I did say I'd like to meet your mum, Tilly. And if this is a joke on your part, Vicar, at least you've the decency to get caught up in it yourself."

"I do not consider the investigation of such practices as Stilby-Nash hints at to be any sort of joking matter." Father Herrick produced a primed and loaded Meerschaum and sucked doggedly on the stem. "I have done some preliminary research and learned that his lordship was a well-respected amateur ethnologist in his day. A bachelor by choice after the death of his intended bride, he sunk himself alternately in the study of English folklore and the doing of good works for his parish. Therefore his unexpected and complete vanishment from all public ken shortly after the first of May, 1848, was remarked and lamented in the local press and church records."

"What — what happened to him?" Telemachus bit his thumb and made small, inarticulate sounds of agitation that crescendoed in a bleat of dismay when Father Herrick replied:

"He was last heard of in a village inn in Sussex which marked the last leg of his walking tour. The innkeeper claimed that his lordship told various people in the common room that he was heading homeward from Greater Ambrose. He then went upstairs to his room. In the morning he was gone and all that was found was the manuscript from which this monograph was later published as a memorial by Lord Stilby-Nash's friends and associates."

"He...*vanished*?" Telemachus' voice shrilled out of control and he lost all mastery of his sweat glands.

"Oh, now see what you've done!" Olivia exclaimed impatiently. "You've sent poor Tilly all rabbity. There, there, Tilly. No offense, but it wasn't the first time one of the gentry skipped out on his host without paying the bill. He probably shinnied down the ivy — these rural inns are positively swarming with ivy — and fell down an abandoned wellshaft or something while trying to find his way to the London coaching station in the dark."

Telemachus sniveled just a bit before daring to ask whether Olivia really thought that might be the case. She assured him it must be, and further comforted him by promising to keep him safe from any wandering wellshafts

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in the vicinity when they took off after the fierce, fructiferous citizens of Greater Ambrose Surlesard.

"Besides, as you yourself said, we must investigate. We owe it to posterity," she wheedled, and by this and comparable appeals to the Battle-Purfitt sense of duty she brought him around.

They traveled down to Sussex the next morning. Olivia, in a fit of whimsy, had chosen to do her holiday shopping while in Staddle, with an eye to returning to London in time for Christmas. As a result of the Dickensian excess the Yuletide always evoked in her soul,her baggage had evolved from a simple rucksack for easy cross-country hiking to a swarm of bulging valises and portmanteaus bought in Staddle High Street to contain her acquired freight of gifts. She had thought it was a fine idea to take the whole jumble of luggage along with her on the expedition, intending to be most efficient by returning directly home from Sussex. After many qualms, she even went so far as to purchase herself an evening gown, so as not to appear at Lady Battle-Purfitt's table inappropriately dressed. She assumed that Tilly and the vicar would be likewise burdened with at least a steamer trunk between them. To her chagrin, she found them awaiting her on the railway platform bearing a rucksack apiece, no more, and those far smaller than her own.

Fortunately, Lady Battle-Purfitt had a car waiting to pick them up on arrival. The family manor of *Earl's Benefice*, much diminished by the family fortunes and the late war, was still a picturesque locale enhanced by an Adam house of considerable taste and beauty. Her ladyship was constructed along similar lines, being an attractive if formidable woman whose whole demeanor was one of tenacity and purposefulness. When she informed her guests at the dinner table that they were to keep the windows of their bedrooms open throughout the night, so as to benefit from the bracing nature of the country air, even the normally headstrong Olivia heard herself chirping rhapsodic agreement over her ladyship's mandate that all beneath the manor roof freeze to death in their sleep. Ill-at-ease in her new gown, which showed off a far more spectacular wealth of rose-petal bosom than her quotidian tweeds ever dared imply, she was already feeling the first frissons of impending frostbite in the most inconvenient places.

Perhaps it was the vicar's desire to stave off so chilly a demise that brought him tiptoe to the door of Olivia's room just as the buhl clock on the mantelpiece struck one. The door did not creak as he gently pushed it open,

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then drew it softly closed behind him. The bare parquet floor exhaled no more than a whisper as his stockinged feet glided over its polished surface. Even the great canopied featherbed with its antique velvet curtains uttered not a groan of protest as he insinuated himself beneath the eiderdown, putting an additional strain on the roped underpinnings.

Olivia, however, hit him so hard that the sharp reverberation of open palm to cheek reached all the way down the corridor to Telemachus' room, leaving that poor soul aquiver with the fear that the supposed thunderclap that had roused him from sleep presaged an unseasonable storm.

"What's the matter with you?" Father Herrick demanded, cupping his smarting face.

"Oh, I like *that*," Olivia sneered. "Come traipsing into my room uninvited, into my *bed*, no less, and there's something wrong with *me*?"

"I should say there is," Father Herrick countered. "Or so the rumors run."

"What rumors?"

"Speculations, rather. Staddle-upon-Truss is a fine village for their cultivation. Unless you've got her pretty well hidden, mules are a rarity."

"At the risk of disrespect to the cloth, you're blithering. Why would I want to hide a mule?"

"Why would you want to be one?" he replied. "Perhaps it's that men aren't to your taste, and in that case there have been the normal conjectures as to who might be your Sapphic counterpart."

Olivia stiffened with indignation. "How *dare* you!" What would have been shouted was instead hissed, out of deference to the hour and fear of provoking a scene that would fetch Lady Battle-Purfitt. "Just because a single woman chooses not to — to give a cornfield frolic to any man who asks her, you accuse her of all sorts of things."

"Really, Olivia, you're pouring a gallon of outrage into a dram measure." Even in the dark, the off-kilter gleam of Father Herrick's toothy leer was visible. "I hope you haven't mistaken my simple expediency for any sort of *genuine* attraction. Frankly, with your looks, I wouldn't wager you've had that many offers to do more in a cornfield than frighten crows."

He stepped away from the bed before she could catch him a box on the ear and made for the door with the casual, smug gait of a town's only tomcat. Hand on the brass knob he paused to add, "And given my own appearance —

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which not a few of my more tender-natured female parishioners have found to be acceptably appealing —you've just passed up the opportunity of a lifetime. Oh well, that's the last time I go in for charity work. Good night, Olivia. At least you can still *read* about fertility."

Breakfast the next morning was an affair of damp and foggy silences, despite the bright Yuletide greens which graced the room. Her ladyship affected not to notice Olivia's moroseness, Father Herrick's smooth disdain, or her own son's insomnia-ravaged eyes. A hostess had her duty to her guests, which duty included making light, amusing, but not frivolous conversation at meals. If set down in the midst of a charnel house and designated hostess to the dead by whatever whimsical Power, Lady Battle-Purfitt would set herself to drawing out the corpses.

"Telemachus tells me you are quite the authority on ancient British fertility rituals, Miss Drummond," she said to Olivia.

"Quite ancient," came the all-too-meaning, uninvited comment from Father Herrick.

Olivia ignored him. "I have written a number of books on the subject, Lady Battle-Purfitt," she replied. "All privately printed. You won't have heard of any of them."

"You might be surprised, Miss Drummond," her hostess returned. "I have always felt that it is a mother's duty to take a lively interest in the occupations of her children. As my late husband, Lord Beaufort Battle-Purfitt, was carried off untimely by an architectural mishap — he was inspecting the family chapel and a squinch fell on him — our own issue was limited to Telemachus."

"The end of the line," Father Herrick murmured just loudly enough so that Olivia could hear but her ladyship could not. "The burgeoning of Telemachus Battle-Purfitt: *There's* a project for the fertility enthusiast."

Lady Battle-Purfitt went on to say, "Of course I have asked Telemachus to recommend to me any number of significant and informative books which might enhance my familiarity with his chosen field. He is quite taken with your scholarship. Your work, *Bow Bells Beltaine: An Examination of Magna Mater Worship Survivals in Cockney Parlance*, was fascinating. Now Telemachus tells me that you have come to this neighborhood to pursue research. I couldn't be more excited."

Her manner of utterance belied her words. Though her tongue might

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prate of rapture at the prospect of an ethnological expedition taking off from her own back yard, figuratively speaking, in truth Lady Battle-Purfitt's expression and demeanor were about as animated as a scuppered haddock.

On the other hand, her son had enough enthusiasm for the both of them and a kennel's worth of Yorkshire terriers thrown in. "Oh yes, Mummy, it's to be ever so marvelous! I was a trifle apprehensive about the whole business back in Staddle, but now — " he giggled " — now I do find it rather titillating. The sense of peril and all that, you know."

"Peril?" Now there was a glimmer of true emotion that had somehow managed to storm the barricades of Lady Battle-Purfitt's impregnable aplomb. "Telemachus, you never told me there was any peril involved. As I understand it, you go somewhere and you scrape the plaster off a church wall until something surfaces or they throw you out. Either that or you nose out some old people and you have them sing you some dreadful ballads with half the words in a dialect thicker than grapefruit marmalade. *My* opinion has always been that the gaffers make up those silly, picturesque lyrics as a joke and laugh all winter about how they pulled the wool over the eyes of you poor, gullible researchers. No offense meant." She said this last in a way intended to convey the idea that there had better not be any offense taken if some people knew what was good for them. "Where is the peril in that?"

"No peril, your ladyship," Olivia said soothingly. "None at all."

Lady Battle-Purfitt's eye narrowed. "Are you calling my son a liar? Under my roof? After what I have reason to believe was an excellent dinner and a passable breakfast? I am asking merely for my own information, you understand."

The barricades were down, there was no escape. Rotter though he was, even Father Herrick retained a large enough measure of compassion for a cornered lady to come to Olivia's aid.

"Your ladyship, your son spoke the truth."

"Ha!"

"As did Miss Drummond."

"Ha?" Lady Battle-Purfitt's clear gray eye housed an armory of skewering glances of all calibers, rather an ocular version of the Swiss Army knife. Now she selected an especially keen *exemplum* of the species and gave it to Father Herrick right in the pineal gland. "Either there *is* peril or there is *not*. Which in turn means that either my son is a liar or Miss Drummond is — not the

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perfect guest." She could think of nothing worse to say about a person. "There can be no two ways about it, Vicar. Zen has no place in Sussex."

"I simply meant that both of them have told you the conditional truth, your ladyship." Father Herrick had a facile tongue and used it to good advantage now. "We go forth this morning in search of the small and somewhat obscure village of Greater Ambrose Surlesard. The peril hinges on *when* we come back."

"Greater Ambrose 'somewhat obscure'?" her ladyship echoed. "Tosh. Why, that's just up the road from here. Simply everyone knows of it. They have the most charming, old-fashioned harvest fair for miles about. During the late war, I took the city children there on several occasions, to share in the wholesome village entertainments."

"Did you?" One of the vicar's black brows rose, both his blue eyes waxed sharp with interest. "Ah...of what sort?"

Lady Battle-Purfitt puffed out her cheeks and shrugged. "Oh, the usual: jumble sales, church bazaars, Maypole romps, Guy Fawkes' Day — *such* a lovely Guy the Ladies' Aid committee made, all of wicker — Morris dances, the blessing of the cornfields — "

Telemachus made a queer, strangled sound in his shallow chest, which caused his mother's brow to beetle into a scowl of blackest dye.

"Well, my dear Lady Battle-Purfitt, there you have the answer for yourself," Father Herrick said swiftly.

"Have I?" The lady looked doubtful. "Might you tell it me, just to make sure?"

In full pedantic *modus operandi*, Father Herrick leaned back in his chair, fingers steepled, eyes casually lifted to the artfully frescoed ceiling as if to trace the random swoops and flutters of the Muse. "It is a sad but true condition of our calling that most otherwise well-educated people believe that the only souls who risk life and limb for the sake of folkloric knowledge are those who do fieldwork among savage aborigines. Too few are privy to the fact that the greatest danger any good preservationist may face lies within the borders of Britain herself."

"Does it," said Lady Battle-Purfitt. She rose from her place and consulted the covered dishes on the sideboard. "Then you will be wanting more kippers before you leave this morning."

Father Herrick purposefully ignored her most courteous scorn. "Scoff

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how they may — and the skeptic is never a lonely soul in this cold age, believe me — still the doubters and deriders have no satisfactory explanation for the inordinate number of ethnological amateurs in Britain proper who have vanished, refused to return home, or grown too embarrassingly deranged even to make acceptable tenured faculty members at American universities. I cite as one example the case of Horace Rosswell."

Telemachus made another of those horrid little sounds as of a mouse meeting its Maker in a drainpipe. His mother turned to him. "Am I to take it by these outlandish utterances that you are familiar with the fate of this Rosswell person, Telemachus? Or haven't you been taking your iron tonic?"

"Horace Rosswell was one of the finest minds in our field, Mummy." Telemachus traced eccentric patterns in the tablecloth with his grapefruit spoon. "Then, one fateful autumn, he heard of a strangely isolated village in Northumberland which was supposed to host a marvelously antiquated October festival in honor of the new ale. He arrived during the third week of that month, intending to remain just for the festival. Unforeseen motor trouble prevented him from leaving before All Hallow's Eve." The spoon's serrated tip tore a sudden gash in her ladyship's fine linen breakfast cloth. "He was never seen again."

"His notebooks, however, were retrieved from a bog near Dublin," Olivia finished the tale. "The last entries were very telling."

"There are parts of this country where the Old Ways survive," Father Herrick pronounced. "Places off the beaten path where the ancient forces hold sway, where jealous gods of old demand blood-sacrifice at the price of their continued indulgence, where the paramount fertility of the earth is to be purchased at whatever price, where Christianity is but an empty word in the mouth of a local clergyman whose true robes of office are white and who knows his mistletoe, where the newly reaped field drinks the blood of the Summer King, where the Great Mother in her many forms demands the seed of heroes, where — "

"And do you mean to say that Greater Ambrose is such a — such a socially undesirable place? Really, Vicar!" Lady Battle-Purfitt was pleased to look smug. "I have come and gone from that village a score of times in the past year alone, and I have never come away with anything worse than a touch of dyspepsia. Rationing or no rationing, those ladies simply do *not* know how to make a decent toad-in-the-hole."

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"Toads indeed," said Father Herrick darkly. "And snakes no doubt, and other creatures whose natural construction places them in unremitting physical contact with the Goddess' fertile bosom. My lady, I have observed danger lies not so much in *where* one goes as in *when*. Our unhappy London brethren learned that one may walk a certain street a hundred times with no harm done, yet walk that same street at the moment when a stick of incendiaries is en route earthward and the results will be quite strikingly different. The pagan year has its festivals just as we have our Christian feasts. It was, in fact, in an attempt to hold onto those newmade converts whose adherence to the established Church might still be wobbly that the authorities moved many of our holidays, secular and religious, to overlap and overwhelm theirs. Thus All Hallow's Eve displaces the Druid's solemn Samhain rites, and May Day frolics supplant Beltaine. Even this holy season of the year replaces their Imbolc celebrations and the marking of the dread Winter Solstice."

"Except they haven't replaced them everywhere!" Telemachus blurted. "It's places like this Greater Ambrose where they still put on the genuine article. I know Imbolc's just a sheep-shearing festival, but from what I've read, these Druids are a very privacy-loving lot and — Oh, Mummy, I don't think they're at all fond of spies."

"Stuff," said Lady Battle-Purfitt. Unimpressed and unperturbed, she addressed her child: "You had an uncle thought he was a Druid, once. *He* claimed it was a moment of spiritual enlightenment. What's so enlightening about motoring over to Stonehenge or Avebury of a summer's dawn and frolicking around starkers, *I'd* like to know. Personally, I think it was just his pitiful hope of getting lashings more, ah, physical, um, carnal, er, libidinous — "

"Sex?" said Olivia helpfully.

Shortly thereafter, Father Herrick and Telemachus joined her at the gates of *Earl's Benefice* with the luggage.

"It's all right, Olivia," Telemachus assured her. "Mummy says we can still stay over for Christmas on our way back. You just have to stay in the porter's lodge and take your meals there."

Olivia did not choose to acknowledge her ladyship's generosity with more than a snort of her thin nostrils. "Couldn't spare us the motor, I see," she said with pointed bitterness.

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"No need for it, really. Greater Ambrose isn't all that far from here. Walking distance, Mummy says."

"Don't make me laugh, Tilly! It's supposed to lie smack in the bosom of a bally mountain range. Do *you* see any mountains?" She threw her arms wide.

Telemachus admitted he did not.

"Besides, you were brought up here. Do you even *recall* anyone mentioning mountains in the area?"

"N-no."

"Nor a village called Greater Ambrose Surlesard either, I'll be bound."

"True, true."

"Well, then!" Olivia concluded, triumphant. "Let's be charitable, and assume that all your mother's prattle of field trips to view the jolly immolation of the Greater Ambrose wicker man are just the fabrications of a mind with too little to do and not much with which to do it."

"Our gracious hostess had mind enough to provide us with directions for reaching the village, nonetheless," said Father Herrick, consulting the closely written back of a greengrocer's bill. "We shall follow them."

"You're as potty as she is!" Olivia snapped.

Father Herrick gave her a patronizing smile. "My dear Olivia, no one is forcing you to tag along. Feel free to go. The City and all its manifold delights await you. Look, here's your luggage, and the trains to London run with astonishing regularity."

"And how am I to reach the railway station from here?" she demanded.

"*Per pedes apostolorum.* Shank's mare. On the heel and toe." The grin widened. "I sincerely doubt whether her ladyship would feel disposed to place her motor at your service after that bolt of improper language you loosed over the kippers. *Ergo,* one must make do."

"See here, I don't mind a little walk — thrive on 'em, as a rule — but not with all this to shoulder." She kicked the rather large valise which held her seasonal finery, as well as the more portable rucksack containing her research equipment. The smaller cases stuffed with presents, some fragile, were for that very reason immune from her brief access of temper. "I can *not* carry all this to the railway station, and I *will* not leave it behind, unattended."

Telemachus crept forward and timorously laid hands upon two of Olivia's larger satchels. "I'll carry it for you if you come with us," he piped.

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"Oh, very well."

It was a fine day for a hike, the air crisp, the vantage clear. The trio found themselves compelled to take frequent rests, to allow poor chivalric Telemachus to regain his breath as he toiled along with the luggage. Olivia carried her own rucksack and the two smaller valises, Father Herrick limited himself to his own rucksack, the boxed lunch, and the burden of spirituality.

It was during one of these pauses for refreshment that the fog rolled in. It was quite a thick fog, not at all the sort of meteorological phenomenon one expected in Sussex, at that time of year, over such topological features, and with so little warning. As a matter of fact it did not so much roll in as drop from above, with a nearly audible thud, as if some unseen Power On High had elected just that moment to let fall a bale of celestial cotton upon the earth.

"Well, I must say, I like *this*," said Olivia, peering through the miasma with vision blurred by dew-hung lashes.

"Please don't whine, Miss Drummond." Father Herrick stopped to consult the reverse of the greengrocer's bill. "Albeit the going has become a trifle less conducive to an overaged school girl's merry holiday, I still know exactly where we are and am fully capable of bringing us to where we are going."

"Know all the ins and outs don't you?" Olivia sniped. "Very well, then; lead on."

So he did. It was not a friendly road. The comfort of treading level beaten earth vanished into the eruption of a multitude of rocky blemishes underfoot, a road that simultaneously turned stony and steep without suitable geological preamble or excuse. Olivia marched on, trading her smaller bags for poor Telemachus' bulkier load out of simple Christian charity. The fog remained impenetrable to the eye, though all around her she believed she scented the unmistakable exhalation of dead leaves, rotting acorns, moldering bark and sprouting fungi.

"It smells like we're in a forest," she announced with some amazement.

"Do you *see* any forest, Miss Drummond?" the vicar inquired, an edge to his words.

"In this fog? I couldn't see my own face if I held up a mirror at arm's length."

"'His mercy endureth forever,'" Father Herrick intoned, using Scripture much as other men might use a small bludgeon. "Perhaps when the fog lifts,

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you shall see that all of your doubts concerning the monticuline and sylvan situation of Greater Ambrose Surlesard were as foolish and meatless as..." He allowed his voice to trail off and shrugged, but it was a shrug honed to meaning, and Olivia rightly read that meaning to be *as yourself.*

She did not want to cry. She had always scorned those young women who reacted to every adversity with tears. To submit to weeping, even if only the random teardrop trickling down her cheek, was to admit that the man had power over her spirit, the power to wound her, the power to make her care more than tuppence for his good opinion of her. So it was the condensation of the fog on her face that accounted for the wetness she felt. It had to be the fog.

Olivia had just wiped away the stubborn condensation for the fourth time when she heard Telemachus utter a loud whoop of distress and the sound of heavy luggage tumbling down a long, narrow, echoing shaft seized her heart with dread. "Tilly? Tilly, are you all right?" She dropped her own bags and hurried toward the sound.

Strong hands closed on her shoulders and she screamed, more from surprise than fear. "Arrh, there, lass, ye don't be wantin' fer t' foller yon gudeman down Hob's Chimbley, now would'ee?" A gravelly voice boomed in her ear and she smelled hot iron and woodsmoke. She squirmed and fought free, only to have the powerful grip close around her arm and yank her backward.

"Look'ee here, gudewyf, yer man a'n't be scumbled, noo. Them as tummits a-down Hob's way, why there a'n't but t' fetch 'em up agin, as hale and brawny as when they pitchert in, for all that 'tis where the gudewyfs o' Broseytown been emptyin' their auld featherdownies lo these many years. Coom'ee, coom wi' me an' bring yer ghostly da the with, so's he'll bear 'un witness."

The fog was beginning to thin out. It was a process only a little less rapid than the wholesale assault of the mists, so that by the time Olivia's captor had done speaking, she had a good look at him and her surroundings. To her surprise, she saw that she was held motionless in the grasp of a short, thickly muscled man with skin as swarthy as any gypsy's, made blacker by a layer of soot. His hair was of the same midnight hue, his slitty, slanted eyes an unnerving blue that made Olivia, all irrationally, think of a hungry wolf.

She felt the rising urge to escape, but suppressed it. Why try? She saw how

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hopeless it would be. Although he did not quite come up to her shoulder, she had no illusions about who was the more powerful of the two. Everything about him was square and mighty, from his amply corded neck and shoulders to the tips of his blunt, filthy fingers. Winter be damned, he was stripped to the waist and wore no more than a blacksmith's leather apron over what looked like a brown loincloth. His feet were bare and seemed ready to thrust roots into the earth at the first opportunity.

Another yowl from Telemachus tore Olivia's attention away from the little man. Now the fog was gone entirely and she could see that she stood not three paces from the lip of a well whose curb was just a ring of flat rocks such as a housewife might use for stepping stones in her garden. A host of spectral white flecks danced merrily in the air above the pit. Olivia shuddered violently as one landed on her forearm.

"Oh, for pity's sake, Olivia, calm down." Father Herrick plucked the small assailant off her with thumb and forefinger. "It's just a bit of goosedown."

The dwarfish blacksmith nodded vigorously. "Tha ghostly da have th' right o't. As I told 'ee 'twas. Coom th' noo an' we'll have auld Granny Bones t' fetch up yer friend, ere he snorbles in too many feathytickles an' gets took of a sudden with the sneezes." Now that he could see there was no further danger of Olivia tumbling down the wellshaft after Telemachus, his hold on her arm turned from shackle to guide as he steered her to one of the twenty trim cottages set so prettily here and there about the town green.

Granny Bones turned out to be a plump, personable matron in her early sixties, despite a name that had Olivia figuring wolfbane, spiderwebs, warts and witchery into the lady's *curriculum vitae.* Like the blacksmith, she was short, stocky, and dark, except for a crown of silver hair and those same disturbingly blue eyes. Rather than standing at the edge of the pit and calling upon long-departed pagan deities to raise Telemachus from the underworld, Granny simply traipsed out to the gardener's shed behind her thatch-roofed cottage, produced a collapsible aluminum ladder, and let it down the well for Telemachus to climb up.

"Used as was we'd but th' rope 'un," she explained for the newcomers' benefit. She spoke the same strange, musical, unassignable dialect as the blacksmith. This singular idiom set Olivia's mind whirling as she tried to find some kindred example from her many interviews with rural types against which to compare and analyze it. No use; it stood unique. "An' tarred right

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thick 'twas from when gudeman Praxter did sail wi' t' Royal Navvy. Thic oon's much th' better, arr, so 't be."

Telemachus came out of the well covered head to foot in discarded poultry feathers, but no worse for the wear. Granny Bones cupped her plump hands to her mouth and let loose a long, eerie, yodeling cry. Immediately every cottage door but one flew open and the inhabitants of Greater Ambrose Surlesard came pouring onto the town green to greet the visitors.

They had indeed achieved their rural grail of Greater Ambrose Surlesard, of that much the natives informed them right off the bat. "Ye're afortuned as ye didn't go toomblies into th' rivvy," said gudeman Paisley Bloodwell, who ran the town's public house and in-a-pinch inn. He and his sturdy son Wensley took charge of the visitors' baggage at once and had them installed in the two spare bedrooms abovestairs before Telemachus got all the feathers plucked out of his hair.

"What, ah, 'rivvy'?" Father Herrick asked, ducking to avoid smashing his forehead on one of the inn's low-hanging beams.

"What rivvy, ask 'un? Why, t' Sard, blest be! Else where'd ye think ye was then, arr? Aye, Greater Ambrose ever be on t' rivvy Sard, from whencit t' proud name of 'un, albeit in they Frenchitruffled Normeen talk, so 'tis. An' mighty fine trouts a man can tickle out of 'un, too, do he set his mind at."

"Textbook case," said Father Herrick some time later as the three adventurers huddled around a plank table in the common room, nursing the local ale. "Absolutely a textbook case of isolated primitivism at its finest. The place utterly reeks with the hot pulsing of blood spilled before the ever-avid gods of rampant carnality." He consulted his pocket watch. "We have until Friday."

"I don't think I need to stay here until Friday," Olivia said. She cast the latest of a series of nervous looks around the common room. Every man-jack of the Greater Ambrosians there present and enjoying the evening pint looked like a minor genetic variation on Granny Bones, the Bloodwells, and the village blacksmith, whose name so happened to be Ham Dethalter. "I would prefer to return to London. I — I still have some holiday shopping to do and — "

"Afraid, Miss Drummond?" Father Herrick's ravenwing brows lifted just a trifle. "No longer the scoffer at poor Stilby-Nash's vanishment that you were?"

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Olivia stiffened. "I am not afraid," she said. She lied, she knew it, they all knew it, but neither Father Herrick nor Telemachus was tactless enough to call her on it. "It's simply that — well, having come here I see that this village shelters a wealth of folkloric subject matter in its nearly pristine state. I have had a word with Granny Bones concerning local songs, traditions, and beliefs, and it is my considered opinion that this area is almost entirely free of any urban contagion. As a matter of fact, Granny said that they have never had a single citizen of Greater Ambrose leave the village to settle elsewhere, and the last person to serve in the armed forces was this Praxter fellow."

"He of the tarred rope ladder?" The vicar tapped his lower lip. "Amazing, particularly in light of the robust health our host's son, the amiably bovine Wensley Bloodwell, seems to enjoy. Why was he not taken up into the service during the late war, I wonder?"

"Oh, Wensley told me that himself," Telemachus put in, sipping his ale carefully. "He's too old." Two inquiring looks caught him in the crosshairs, causing him to choke a bit on his drink, then say, "Well, he told me he tried to enlist, but they weren't taking anyone over the age of sixty-five, so he turned about and came right back ho — "

"Sixty-five." Father Herrick repeated the figure as one who has been told he owes a certain absurd sum to the Inland Revenue and assumes that by simple repetition he will work some domestic magic that will cause the vanishment of debt, debtor, or the Inland Revenue and all who sail in her.

"I know he doesn't look it," Telemachus hastened to add.

"Tilly, that is an understatement on a par with saying that Miss Drummond is plain." The vicar's lip curled.

"Oh, I say!" Telemachus took umbrage, at the which Olivia wondered. "Miss Drummond is not — she is not — not one of these over-painted bridge club sorts, but — "

"Plain," Father Herrick repeated suavely. "In the best sense of the word, of course. Wholesome. Like milk. You do like milk, I'm sure?" Telemachus could not but agree and left off his gallant sputterings. "You see, dear boy, you were quite mistaken as to the disparaging intent of my remark concerning Miss Drummond's looks. I submit that you must also have been in error as to the age you heard young Wensley claim, as well as the reason for his rejection from the armed services. Perhaps he *told* them that he was sixty-five and clung to the tale so zealously that they assumed the lad was daft

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and sent him packing?"

"Yes, I suppose that's one answer," Telemachus admitted.

"Ah!"

"It's wrong, of course. I saw his baptismal certificate." For the first time Olivia could recall seeing such a prodigy, Telemachus' eyes sparkled with spunk and triumph.

It was now Father Herrick's turn to sputter. He lacked practice and made a poor showing of it. "What trumpery — ? How gullible can you — ? Did you never think — ? Telemachus, does the word *forgery* suggest nothing to you?"

"I can tell a genuine baptismal certificate from a false, if that's what you mean, Vicar," Telemachus countered. "My chosen life's-work may not pay much in coin — Heaven knows, I've quite a comfortable little income to support me — but it has earned me more than sufficient experience in researching church records. Wensley Bloodwell was born foursquare in the reign of Queen Victoria."

For once in his life, Telemachus Battle-Purfitt spoke with a degree of confidence and force capable of taking the wind from the sails of a whole fleet of Father Herricks. The vicar was blown, good and proper.

"But — but that makes no sense!" he protested. "Wensley is the youngest person I've yet seen in this godforsaken hamlet, and if he's sixty-five — "

"If I was permitted access to the church records, I have no doubt that you may come along and see them for yourself," Telemachus said.

The church of Greater Ambrose Surlesard was a Romanesque structure so blocky as to make stolid Norman architecture look like the airy stone fantasies of the High Gothic. A light snow was falling as the three visitors trudged across the village green — carefully skirting Hob's Chimbley — to seek confirmation of Telemachus' extraordinary discovery.

"The parish records are kept in a locked cabinet in the vestry," Telemachus explained as they entered the musty portal. "There's a kindly old gentleman about the place who showed them to me when I asked. He has the key, of course, although whether he is the sexton, the curate, or the vicar himself, I couldn't say."

"Vicar?" Father Herrick was pleased to be sarcastic. "A vicar to tend to the spiritual wants of *this* hotbed of ancient agricultural festivity? I am astonished at your innocence, Tilly. The dark, tellurian forces which reign over Greater Ambrose long since must have demanded the sacrifice of any

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representative of the Established Church."

"Well," said Telemachus, craning his neck to peer into the unlit depths of the building, "maybe he was just the sexton after all."

While he and Father Herrick went hallooing into the shadows, searching for the supposed sexton and his keys, Olivia occupied herself by studying the various plaques, mortuary tablets, and paintings adorning the high windowless walls. It was quite educational, although she could not remember ever having felt so dire a chill creep up her spine as part of any previous learning experience.

For there they were, all over the walls: the lizards. The mural at Staddle-upon-Truss was but a poor cousin to the reptilian richness of these decorations. On the south wall some anonymous artist of pre-Norman stock had limned a grand processional in which flower-crowned maidens wearing smiles and precious little else walked in solemn majesty toward a stone-girt hole in the ground that looked remarkably like Hob's Chimbley. Each damsel carried in her fair white arms a lizard. On the north wall was a kindred processional, this one belonging to a later period in the history of Church art, in which able-bodied yeomen of Agincourt's date marched with longbows or agrarian implements over their shoulders and lizards in their hands.

"Nice, isn't it?" said a voice behind Olivia. She gave a startled chirp and whirled around to face a most ancient gentleman whose lively blue eyes loaned an illusion of youth to his densely wrinkled skin and waist-length white hair and beard. "Although I like the one with the girls better. You can see their bubbies without straining your eyes too much. Nice, white, round little dumplings as they got, 'twere a pity could no one see 'em." His eyes fell deliberately to Olivia's own tweed-shrouded chest, causing her all unnecessarily to cross her arms over her veiled assets.

"Are you — are you the sexton?" she stammered.

"No," the old gentleman replied. "I'm the wizard." He extended his right hand in jovial good-fellowship. "Merlinus Ambrosius, master of the black arts at your service, marm. And whom do I have the pleasure of — ?"

"Father Herrick!" Hate it how she might, Olivia could not prevent her voice from skirling up in that silly school girl way. "Oh, Father Herrick, Tilly, come quickly!"

Feet came pounding swiftly from the rear of the church as Telemachus and Father Herrick responded to Olivia's panic-stricken cries. "What — what

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— what is it?" the vicar panted, leaning against a fat, painted pillar wreathed with a salamander motif.

Before Olivia could say a word, Telemachus stepped forward, smiling brightly. "Ah, this is a bit of good luck! I see you've found him." He shook the old man vigorously by the hand.

It was later, while Father Herrick pored over the freed church records under the benevolent eye of their elderly keeper, that Olivia nudged Telemachus and whispered, "Did you know he's a loony?"

"What? That sweet old geezer?" Telemachus glanced at the old man with a soft eye abrim with Dickensian sentimentality. "A trifle enthusiastic, perhaps, but I shouldn't wonder over that too much. I'll wager he gets precious few opportunities to show off the documents in his care, except as the necessity of some lawsuit or other might demand." He sighed. "Poor chap, how lonely he must be. He told me he has neither kith nor kin living."

"He told me he was Merlin," Olivia stated.

"Well, what's in a name?" Telemachus shrugged.

"Not merely the shadow of Arthur's wizard, Tilly, but the substance; that's his claim." Olivia made a face. "Bonkers. Clean bonkers. I hope he's not violent, that's all."

Father Herrick appeared to have grown more than courteously companionable with the aforesaid loony. The two heads, dark and silver, bowed over the church records, bobbing now in earnest, scholarly discussion, now in cordial mirth. At one point Olivia saw Father Herrick deliberately slue his eyes in her direction, lift his brows, and wink at the old man who grinned and whispered something in the vicar's ear. She could not know for certain of what Father Herrick spoke, but she could make a fairly accurate guess. Both men roared with laughter as the hot blood of mortification flooded her face.

"Olivia?" A baffled Telemachus called out after her as she stiff-armed him aside and dashed out of the church. She paid him no mind. Just as a single extra straw may cause a laden camel no end of inconvenience, this last sniper's shot from the rejected vicar had been one more than poor, put-upon Olivia could bear. Despite her best efforts, the stiffness of her upper lip was dissolving in the badly pent-up floods of tears trembling in her eyes. Her vision blurred, nor was it helped by the fact that the snowfall outside had gone from gentle flakes to briskly whipping blast. All was whirling whiteness to her sight as she dashed across the green.

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All went from white to black, without ceremony, as she tripped upon a bit of stone and tumbled down Hob's Chimbley.

Olivia woke some time later — precisely how much later she could not gauge — to the distant sound of voices raised in argument. She opened her eyes slowly, gloved hands going over her throbbing head until they found the spot around back where she had knocked herself silly against the masonry walls. If there was no further damage done, it was thanks to the billows of discarded goosedown lining the pit. She plucked a pinch of the stuff and idly blew the feathers up toward the surface world.

"Olivia? Olivia, are you all right?" Telemachus' anxious voice reached her. She looked up but could not see his face, merely the familiar shape of his head overhanging the abyss, stark black against the backdrop of the falling snow.

"I'm fine, Tilly," she called.

"Of course she's fine!" Father Herrick's testy words nipped her like the teeth of frost. "With all that cushioning down there, it would take a real idiot to do himself any serious harm."

"Arr, well, an' don't this fall out betimelies."

Telemachus' head was jerked away from the brink of Hob's Chimbley to be replaced by the apple-cheeked countenance of Granny Bones. Olivia thought it odd that she could see the old woman's features so clearly under optic circumstances that allowed her to perceive Telemachus only in silhouette. Still, there it was.

"My dear woman, *must* you look so pleased?" High above Olivia's head, Telemachus' querulous voice rang out. "I have asked you repeatedly to fetch the ladder. You have as repeatedly ignored me. I thought it might have been your purpose first to see whether Miss Drummond would prove capable of ascending independently, upon her return to consciousness." His head reappeared over the edge as he caroled down, "You do think you can climb out by yourself, don't you, Olivia?"

She got to her feet by degrees, establishing a shaky footing on the feathery floor before cupping hands to mouth and shouting back up at him, "Yes, I'm sure I can, if someone will just fetch me that blessed ladder!"

"There! You see?" Telemachus stood justified.

"We do be seein'," Granny Bones replied in the very tone so venerable a lady might use toward a favored though forward grandchild. "Fit as a pippin

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she be, an' that's all to the good, fer what awaits the lass."

"What do you mean?" The quaver was back in Telemachus' words, shaking them badly. "What are you talking about? What awaits her?"

"Why, t' ancient rite, o' course, so I be meanin'. Here it be, full upon us, an' t' moon in her proper phase for 'un, an' wicked bad powers runnin' strong thro' t' earth agin our sacred shapin's o' t' forces what be. Na, na, sirrah, don't be gawperin' at me so. 'Tis nowt as'll harm t' lass, an' much good we'll glean from her the bye."

Olivia closed her eyes. Above, the argument had rejoined, but she paid no mind to the individual words thereof. Let Telemachus yip and squeal his outrage, let Father Herrick cluck his tongue and say he'd told them so, none of that signified. She knew she was doomed. Friday would be her last upon this earth.

Friday, and the Yuletide.

The ancient rite.

Evil powers running through the earth, oh yes, she knew what it all meant for her!

She was to be the sacrifice, the primitive guarantee of fertility. At that dread time of year when the simple countryfolk of oldentimes saw only death in the frozen furrow and the very sun seemed to be dying, something must be done to revive the heavens and the earth. Her blood would fructify the land before you could say *chthonic.*

And what will they do with poor Tilly? she wondered. *Father Herrick's grown thick as thieves with the local zany, the old coot who calls himself Merlin, so he'll be able to slither his way out of this atavistic nightmare. He'll convince these rustics that their gory little secret's safe with him, but Tilly — Tilly's too honest to play the cozener.* She sighed. *Maybe they'll keep him around for the summer solstice frolics and toss him in a bog somewhere. Poor, poor Tilly. He once told me that marshwater gives him the ague fearfully bad.*

Once more she cupped her hands to mouth and shouted up, "Listen, I know what you're up to! Well, go ahead and do your worst. Only let my friends go free. They shan't tell a soul about any of this."

Father Herrick's sneer echoed nicely down Hob's Chimbley. "No, we'll just wander back to civilization — two ordinary men who were last seen in the company of a single woman — and no one will question why we've come

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back without you at all." A cynical snicker came tumbling after. "Sorry, Olivia, old girl, but your virginity isn't half so precious to these people as maintaining an uncomplicated life is to me."

"Ohhhh, virgin she be?" Granny Bones leaned further over the pit so that her bosom hung down like a rain-heavy cloud. "Even better fer us, aye." A hearty chorus of assent came from several throats whose owners remained beyond Olivia's limited ken.

"I thought virginity of the sacrificial victim was a must in these rituals." Father Herrick sounded irked.

"Na, na, not a bit o' it. All that's wanted fer 'un is that whatever goes betoomblies adown Hob's Chimbley play t' chosen part. 'Thout ye folk'd done so, 'twould've fallen out so's we'd needs must push one o' our own number adown 'un. The which we be more'n a bitsy unwilling t' do, aye."

Telemachus spoke out then, strong and true. "If that's so, then take me and let Miss Drummond go!"

Granny Bones leaned one sweatered elbow on the lip of the shaft. "Tak' 'ee?" She didn't seem surprised by the offer, merely interested.

"Yes, me." Telemachus' voice quavered only a bit as he reiterated his gallant offer. "I was the first to fall down Hob's Chimbley, after all. It's — it's my right!"

"Oh, arr, so't be, only — Weeel, usual t' rite calls fer a female. Seein' as how t' lass be a virgin pure in t' bargain an' all, I'm afeared she's got ye beat on points."

There was a silence that hovered in the frosty air for as long as it takes a young man to swallow hard, grit his teeth, and weigh in his heart the things that really matter.

"So am I."

Olivia thought she would never hear such a roistering to-do as broke out among the populace of Greater Ambrose then. The ladder was fetched posthaste and slung down the shaft without further let or hindrance. As she climbed out of her downy cell, Olivia blinked her eyes against the surface light like a lantern-struck barn owl. The only soul left to greet her was Father Herrick. The massed villagers were already some distance away, and getting farther by the moment. She could just make out poor Tilly's skinny limbs splaying this way and that as he was borne off upon the shoulders of the crowd.

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"You'd just stand by and permit this— this pagan outrage?"

She spared herself just long enough to brush off the clinging feathers before seizing Father Herrick by the jacket lapels and shouting in his face, "We must run for help at once! They'll kill him!"

The vicar glanced at her with dreamy eyes. "Mmm. Must we? I mean, do you think we'd ever reach civilization in time to do the luckless blighter any good? Friday's only a day off, and they're likely to perform the rite at sunup, so we've scarcely a bit more than twenty-four hours."

"You'd just stand by and permit this — this pagan outrage?" Another minute and Olivia knew she would be blithering with fury.

"Well, I don't see as how there's much we can do about it. Even did we manage to find our way to *Earl's Benefice* in this snow — " He looked skyward to where the falling flakes had reached a consensus and resolved to become a minor blizzard without further delay " — could we be certain of finding our way back again? We arrived in a fog, remember. Not the best circumstances for recognizing helpful landmarks."

"You — you — !" Despite herself, there she was, flying into a dudgeon in a manner she had always scorned when she viewed the same in the performances of minor West End actresses. "You think you're safe, that's why you won't do anything to help Tilly! *Or* me, if it had come to that! You just want to be here when they perform their ghastly ritual so that when it's all over you can go home, snug as you please, and write it all up to the greater glory of Father John Herrick!"

"Baronet," the vicar added, that faraway look in his eyes once more. "Esquire. A knighthood, perhaps. Major scholarship of this water might not be without its more palpable rewards, don't you think, Olivia?"

"Oooohhhhhh, you — you — " She puffed up like a teakettle until, simultaneously fed up with his cold ambition and her own overheated impotence, she shouted, "You *toad!*" and pushed him hard in the chest with both hands.

"Aaiiiiiiieeeeeeee!" said Father Herrick as, being a good toad, he plummeted straight down the hole of Hob's Chimbley. There came a feather *plouf!* when he made impact, then not a sound save the falling

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snow and gusting wind.

Olivia looked in all directions, at a loss for what to do first. The ladder in Hob's Chimbley was still in place, but she assumed that the vicar was too stunned to use it, at least for the time being. A practical woman, she knew she was not strong enough to carry him up, even were she so inclined. As indeed she was not. A vindictive woman, she removed the ladder. It might benefit the vicar's soul and outlook in general if, on waking, he were to have the leisure to contemplate his selfish ways in the relative tranquility of the shaft.

A decision was made: she would go after the villagers and by Harry, she would make them let Tilly go or she'd give them blood for their furrows in spades!

Although the mob had vanished from her ken, their prints were still plain to see in the snow. These, however, were filling fast. She spared only a few instants to dash into the abandoned blacksmith shop to obtain some manner of weapon. She cast about in vain. Ham Dethalter might not lock up his shop, but he did tidy away most of his tools in chests and cabinets that wanted a key to be opened. Olivia tried to raise the big sledgehammer, failed, and settled for a pair of badly bent fireplace tongs which some customer or other had left to be bashed straight again.

Outside, she sniffed the rising wind like a hound. Night's blackness was seeping swiftly over all. The footprints of the crowd had faded to ghosts, but she was still able to follow them in the fading light until a distant hubbub of music and voices caught her ear and brought her the rest of the way home.

The brouhaha was coming from a large white house which lay a goodly distance from the village green. It huddled in a small, bowl-shaped dell through which ran a modest stream, black against the snow and still clear of ice despite the weather. One old oak stood before the door, a curious exception to the evergreens which bushed up all around the property like dowagers in ratty furs.

The windows on the ground floor were all brightly alight and the sound of awful revelry reached her unhindered by any muffling draperies. Her ungloved hand grasping the tongs was freezing. Her other hand, crammed deeply into the pocket of her coat, fared little better as she edged up to the nearest sill and steeled herself for whatever grim display she might presently see.

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" — so I tells him, 'Oooooh, Mr. Dickens, ain't ye t' saucy rogue?' And what's t' naughty bugger do but goose me wi' his missus not a stone's throw away, haggling wi' auld Ham over t' price o' soom gilt andirons!"

Granny Bones clinked her frothing mug of ale against the blacksmith's and drained it, then urged Telemachus to do the same with his.

Poor Tilly was sandwiched between the two village worthies, pale as a slice of cheese between hunks of good brown bread. One hand clutched a brimming mug of ale, the other held onto his knobbly knees for dear life. "I — I doubt I ought," he replied, setting the mug aside and using both hands to safeguard his knees from any prowling joint-bandits.

A chorus of objections came from the merry villagers filling the garland-hung room. Jolly faces beamed at the guest of honor where he sat in splendor on a huge plush armchair before the roaring fire. Granny Bones and the blacksmith perched on the plum-colored armrests like a pair of upholstery gargoyles.

Against one wall Olivia could see a groaning board of gargantuan proportions, laden with all manner of succulent seasonal delicacies — roast goose, mince pies, syllabub, a holly-crowned boar's head, partridges roasted and regarbed in the gaudy plumage they had worn in life, a brimming punchbowl where whitecaps of "lambswool" bobbed alongside wizened crabapples.

The ancient noddy who called himself Merlin was manning the ladle. "Drink up, drink up!" he insisted. "We're all friends here. Nothing like a good stoup of ale to welcome in the festive season. Unless you'd fancy a measure of this?" He doled out a cupful of punch and offered it to Telemachus.

"No, no, really, I couldn't." Tilly's hand was shaking as he waved off the old man's hospitality. "Besides, I — I should think you'd prefer me to keep my wits about me. If I should stumble in the procession tomorrow, it might disturb the holiness of the occasion, ruin the sacrifice, and so forth."

Tomorrow! The word slammed Olivia's heart. But tomorrow was only Thursday. Her womanly self exclaimed, *Oh, poor Tilly!* Her scholarly side huffed, *They are* supposed *to hold the Yuletide sacrifice on* Friday! *Haven't these stupid pagans read the right books?*

"Blest be t' heart o' 'un." Granny Bones chuckled warmly. "Heaven love 'ee, child, nowt ye could do as'd harm our solemnities. *They* a'n't too picky over what we offers 'em. Not like soom." Her sparkling eyes dimmed. A look

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of gravest concern momentarily froze her features. She made a strange, unChristian sign over herself — a slithery passage of the hand from shoulder to shoulder — which was aped by every villager there present.

"I take it — I take that *they* are your gods?" Telemachus asked. But before he could obtain an answer, there came a harsh crash at the door, then another, then a third which splintered the portal at the lockplate and sent it swinging wide open to the wintry blast.

"Don't worry, Tilly!" Olivia cried, brandishing the tongs. "I'll save you!"

"Oh, for — !" The old man by the punchbowl made a face. "Young woman, in decent society we are taught to *knock*." He raised the ladle and wigwagged it in the air. Olivia was swept from her feet on what looked like a sparkling cloud of pastel fireflies and plunked down on a chair which sprang up like a mushroom from the floor right beside Tilly's seat. When she attempted to rise from her place, still swinging the tongs wildly, her weapon of choice transformed itself into an infant ferret which ducked into her sleeve. Much shrill squealing and a couple of minutes' worth of amateur Irish jigging later, she managed to evict it. Paisley Bloodwell lured it off with a pheasant leg and peace returned.

Olivia hid her face in her hands and sobbed.

"Miss Drum — Olivia." Warm hands closed over her shaking shoulders. "Please don't carry on so. I shan't have a minute's peace going to my death if you won't stop crying over me."

The general level of jollity pervading the gathering vanished like a drop of oil in the Atlantic. "Death?" Bloodwell the tapster repeated. "Here, now! Ye told auld Granny as ye was in t' pink. Ye han't bin aholdin' back anything, now has 'ee?"

"Arr," Ham Dethalter concurred. "Gin ye're summat betooken wi' t' rheumaties, 'twould be wicked evil doin's at t' ritchul, an' no mistake."

Almost without thinking, Olivia found herself melting into Telemachus' arms. From this haven she raised her head and bitterly confronted the villagers. "How kind of you to insist that your human sacrifices die in good health."

"Wot?"

"Human?"

"Sackereefices?"

The silver-headed gaffer self-yclept Merlin rolled his eyes. "Not *again!*"

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he exclaimed, plainly at the tether's end. "Oh, *he'll* laugh himself silly, if he wasn't such a vicious bastard." Eyes boring gimlet holes into Olivia and Telemachus he spat, "Bloody folklorical fools."

Telemachus looked entirely bewildered, but his protective embrace around Olivia's shoulders did not falter. "Eh?" he inquired. "Then am I — am I to understand that the rite for which you require my person tomorrow does not also require my life?"

"You might say that," Merlin replied dryly. "If you weren't such a book-bound idiot."

"Oh, I say!" Telemachus took umbrage.

"If I'd've had it my way," the codger continued, "I'd've tossed the two of you down Hob's Chimbley and left you there for a Yuletide gift, but what can I do?" His expansive gesture took in the whole room and the villagers therein. "My hands are tied. I'm only here on sufferance, and even in my day it wasn't the done thing to insult the prejudices of one's host. Bread and salt and all that claptrap."

"'Twere a Bloodwell as found 'im," said the innkeeper of the same family name, cocking a calloused thumb at the old man. "Aye, just amucklin' through t' woods, old Orsli Bloodwell were, when he spies this fine old oak an' thinks to hisself, he do, what a prime log un'd make for t' cruel winter wot was comin'."

"I was lucky he didn't chop my ankles off when he felled my tree." Clearly Merlin did not share the innkeeper's worshipful pride in the Bloodwell family's great historical accomplishment. "But he did not, so there you are. There I was, rather. One look and the good fellow bundled me straightaway home with him to this sweet place. Oh, it was a fine change from the hustle-bustle of Camelot, with all its intrigue and treachery and illicit bedwarming and Esus knows what-all, I can tell you! I half believe I allowed that sluttish chit of a Nimue-person to imprison me with my own magic just so I could get a few hours of peace and quiet."

"A few hours?" Olivia was incredulous. "But if what you say is so, it was more like a few centuries."

Merlin made a wry face. "Madam, you exaggerate, although not by much. The trouble was, the little strumpet took to magic like a salamander to the flames. Oh she did a bang-up job on me, all right, in more ways than one. I was quite glad of some human companionship by the time Paisley's great-

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grandfather broke me out. You can't get any intelligent conversation out of beetles, you know, unless it's about politics. And even then, there were so many of those damned Saxon kings mollocking up the landscape the year I emerged that I did *not* want to talk about *them.*"

"Surely you can't mean his *great*-grandfather," Olivia asserted. "Not in the same breath as Saxon kings."

"Oh, can't I," Merlin countered. "I bloody well *can.* All of them called Egbert or Egdred or Egontoast or suchlike daft names, ugh! I tell you, I positively leaped with joy when the Normans showed up. At least none of their kings sounded like what you get out of a hen's bum."

"This is madness," Olivia breathed, burrowing even deeper into Telemachus' arms. "Madness!" She raised her head and shouted at the room, "You can *not* possibly have only four generations between yourselves and the Saxon kings, you can *not* claim that your youngest fellow was born in the reign of Queen Victoria, and you can *not* by any stretch of the imagination expect us to believe that you are the true and original wizard Merlin from King Arthur's time! You are all either insane or the greatest nest of liars I've ever met outside of London!"

A damp and foggy pall of silence fell over the once-merry gathering. The assembled villagers exchanged solemn glances, then one by one filed out of the house and into the night leaving Merlin alone with Tilly and Olivia. The old man looked extremely put out.

"Now you've done it," he said brusquely.

"Where — where have they gone?" Telemachus inquired

"Somewhere they won't be insulted, I fancy. But return they shall, make no mistake! They'll be back when it's time to prepare you for the ritual. Only the punch will be cold by then and quite spoiled. Never you mind all the trouble I went to in mixing it up on such short notice, oh no!"

"Couldn't you just, ah—" Telemachus wiggled a finger at the punchbowl the way Merlin had wiggled the ladle " — heat it up that way?"

The old man snorted. "Shows all you know! Magic and alcohol don't mix. Hmph! The more I see of what this world's become, the happier I am to remain in this blessed backwater. Courtesy's dead."

"And so shall we be, soon enough!" Olivia cried out in despair.

"Dead? You?" Merlin's scorn was palpable. "Not at the rate you're going. Virgins last forever. It's having brats that ages a person and drags him down

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into the grave before his time. To say nothing of what a drain children are upon a community's resources. Never a village big enough to hold all of 'em, and before you know where you are they're agitating to spread their wings and take off for the city. Well! Between the ones that stay home and suck a hamlet dry and the ones that run off and leave their poor parents feeling like a pile of moldery antiques, children have done for more pretty little rural spots in Britain than the Black Death." He crossed his arms. "The less the breeding, the longer you live."

Before Olivia or Telemachus could question him, the old man waved the punchbowl ladle at them again and they found themselves blown from their chairs into a small room just off the parlor. The door slammed and they heard a heavy wooden bar fall across it from the outside. Olivia flung herself against the portal, pounding it with her fists until Telemachus stayed her with a touch of his hand.

"It's no use," he said, and she knew he was right. She began to cry in earnest.

"Oh, stop that!" Merlin's voice came from the far side of the door. "I only put you in there to keep you safe until the others return. I've got some housework to do and I don't want you running off. Not in this weather. You'd do yourselves more of a mischief than we ever would. Why, you might even fall down that stupid hole again. I don't see why they don't just fill it in; it's a menace to public safety. But the last time I suggested it, Granny Bones said that *he* wouldn't like it, and when *he* doesn't like a thing, he makes sure everyone knows about it."

Telemachus pressed his cheek to the door and asked, "*He* being—?" But Merlin was already bustling about his household chores.

In time, Olivia's tears dwindled down to a pair of raspy sobs and a final hiccup. Telemachus offered her his pocket handkerchief. She dried her eyes and examined their cell, in the vague, romantic hopes of finding some avenue of liberation. Most of her childhood literature had consisted of adventures in which the imprisoned heroine never failed to be rescued or to save herself by the simple device of discovering a means of escape. Said means always remained stubbornly anonymous until such time as the heroine's situation reached the proper level of desperation. Then and only then did a trick of the light reveal the hinges of the secret passageway, or a sudden shift in the dust of centuries disclose an unguessed trapdoor.

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Alas, whoever had designed Merlin's cottage had not read the proper literature. There was a window, but it was too high up and too narrow to allow escape. It did give a rather nice view of the moonlit snow, however.

"It is lovely, is it not?" Telemachus' words were a thrilling warmth in her ear. "Strange how we see beauty best only when we know it will soon be taken from us. Moonlight and snow, so pale, so lovely." She felt his hands on her shoulders, and an answering pressure roundabout her heart. She could not speak — she dared not. The air was thick with silvery spells. She tasted them with every indrawn breath.

His hands shifted slightly, making her turn toward him. She saw the snow-dappled shadows fall in lacy veils across his face. Whose smoldering, tender, demanding eyes were those behind his spectacles? Surely not good old Tilly's! Tilly...no, no, not *Tilly*. She would not dare use such a silly name to speak of this — this — (did she dare to dream him so?) this *man*.

"Lovely," he repeated, and then his lips fell hungrily over her own, his arms crushing her. She found to her surprise and delight that she quite enjoyed being thus crushed. She even tried to crush back, a bit.

And one thing led to another until there were no clothes and very little propriety left.

"Oh dear," said Telemachus afterward. "I'm afraid we're in for it now." But his satisfied smile belied the timidity of his words entirely.

Olivia giggled. "Well, that's one way to spoil a virgin sacrifice." She settled her arms comfortably around his neck and said, "Let's make double certain it's ruined."

They were at the initial stages of this worthy project when the door opened and Merlin stood silhouetted by the light, his skinny body framed by a backdrop of curious villagers. He started to say, "Come along now; it's time." He ended by saying, "Come a — Oh, *bugger!*"

"Don't look, son!" the innkeeper cried, clapping a hand across Wensley's goggling eyes. "Ye're too young fer such."

Olivia grabbed for her scattered clothing while Telemachus crouched before her in his best attempt at a protective posture. Merlin took one look at the skinny young man's snarling lips and flashing eyes, remarked, "Silly git," and gestured. Both lovers found themselves immediately clothed, lacking only their overcoats.

"It's a marvel!" Olivia gasped, staring down at herself.

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"Not such a big one," Telemachus replied, fidgeting. "The old coot's got my smallclothes on backward."

"It won't make any difference where you're going," Merlin said, his voice colder than the winter weather outside. "Let's be off. It's nearly dawn."

The villagers stayed only long enough to pass two bulky bundles of folded cloth to the wizard, who in turn bestowed them on Olivia and Telemachus. While the bemused pair shook these out, all the villagers dashed away again. The cloth bundles turned out to be thick wool cloaks, heavily embroidered with intricate patterns of fantastic beasts. The new-made lovers exchanged a scientist's glance of recognition: These were the very creatures from the fatal church mural that had brought them here.

"Lizards," Telemachus whispered.

"Lizards," Olivia repeated. "But...why?"

"Perhaps they're not lizards. Perhaps they're really dragons." Telemachus shuddered. "Anything is possible in this uncanny place."

Olivia gave her qualified agreement: "Smallish dragons. I think if we're thrown to any such, we might have a good chance of holding them off...for a time...if there aren't too many of them."

"Oh, hush before you spout worse rubbish." Merlin prodded her in the small of the back with his twiggy finger. "Put the cloaks on and move along. It's almost past time to begin."

They walked where they were taken, out of Merlin's cottage, out of the dell, and back into the center of Greater Ambrose. They set foot upon the village green just in time to see Ham Dethalter helping Father Herrick over the lip of the shaft. The vicar glowered at Olivia, but she was too downcast in her mind to return the hostile grimace. Apart from that, the area was deserted.

"Now what was that fool doing down there?" Merlin muttered. "Playing it close, he was! A mercy he was got out in time."

"Time to throw us in," Olivia said softly.

Telemachus squeezed her hand by way of comfort. "If we must die, let us die together, my darling."

"I'm going to be ill," the wizard announced. "You city noodles haven't the sense God gave hedgehogs. How often must I say it? If a country can produce over thirty-five different kinds of cheese, why can't it also have more than one way to run a ritual? We are not throwing perfectly useful human

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beings down Hob's Chimbley! Not now, not ever — well, not on purpose, anyhow — and not today, of all days!"

"You have — you have some other place you perform the sacrifice?" Telemachus inquired, the amateur scholar to the bitter end.

An unpleasant glimmer lit the wizard's eyes. "Why, yes, of course we do," he said in a frightfully insinuating tone. "It's like — it's like whatd'youcallums, Christmas waits. Aye, that's it: The waits who go caroling house to house in the village, so quaint and melodious and all that. Only in this case — stop me if you've heard this one before — in *this* case the carolers take *you* from house to house, and after the householder stands them a treat for their songs, the waits chop off a little bit of one of *you* — a finger, a toe, a nose, whatever they fancy — and give it to their host by way of thanks. That's how they do it, 'round and 'round the village until they run out of bits and pieces or they run out of carols, whichever comes first. Then it's everyone off to the winter fields to plant the pieces and ensure the fertility of the land and — "

"You're making that up," said Olivia.

"And what if I am? You're the one who's so set on being a human sacrifice. I'm only trying to please your prejudices. You wouldn't accept the truth if it bit you on the bum."

"Truth biting me on the fundamentals would at least seem more believable than your cock-and-bull tale of bloodthirsty carolers."

"So my tale's unbelievable, eh? Well, my fine lady, then how do you explain *that*?" Merlin pointed dramatically.

Telemachus squinted. "I don't see anything."

"Of course you don't *see* anything, you lackwit, they're too far off and the houses are still in the way, but there's no way I can make a grand, wizardly gesture that tells you you're supposed to *listen* for something, eh?"

Olivia saw nothing, but she *heard*. Oh, how she heard! It was the unmistakable sound of many voices raised in song. Through the clean, crisp, fir-scented dawn the carol came, its cadence slow, majestic, but exultant, the words as yet too faint to be made out.

They came in twos and threes, all the villagers of Greater Ambrose (except Ham, who was fishing the aluminum ladder out of Hob's Chimbley now that Father Herrick had been dredged to safety). The watery winter sun cast their shadows weakly before them. They marched down one of the

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narrow hamlet streets, wearing stiff woolen robes dyed berry-red or evergreen, the thickly decorated hems acting like miniature plows to cast the snow away to both sides of the procession. Their gold-embroidered sleeves trailed almost to the ground.

Granny Bones led the way, marking the beat with the clack-clack-clacking jaws of a tiny skull. Olivia gasped.

"For pity's sake, girl, that's only Rollo's headbone!" Merlin snapped.

"Oh, poor Rollo!" Olivia was transfixed with horror.

"Stuff! Rollo died at the ripe old age of seventeen."

"So young?" She trembled, on the brink of a faint.

"Young?" Merlin scoffed. "Why, for a Pekingese that's ancient! Always loved the Yuletide ritual, did Rollo. Run up and down the length of the procession giving that snuffly little bark of his. Still, you'd think old Granny'd leave the poor beast to rest in peace."

By now the procession was on the village green proper and Olivia could see that it was indeed a dog's skull that Granny carried. Behind her came two village men, each carrying something small and white in their cupped hands. ("*Soap*, you ninny!" Merlin growled in her ear. "All it is is soap, so don't go taking another one of your cat fits.") They were followed by two more men — Paisley and Wensley Bloodwell — bearing silver basins full of water. They had towels draped over their arms and were the twins of the next two men in line, and the next.

In all, a round dozen male citizens of Greater Ambrose Surlesard marched onto the green, all equipped as if for Maundy Thursday and the washing of some poor beggarfolks' feet. By now the words of the song on their lips was quite audible.

Audible, Olivia soon realized, was no substitute for credible.

"Bring forth your lizards, put them in a tub.

"Bring forth your lizards, rub-a-dub-a-dub.

"Jesus was born this day in Bethlehem.

"Don't tell your lizards; it means nowt to them."

"Lizards?" Olivia echoed. "*Lizards*?"

Merlin leaned his bearded chin over her shoulder and whispered, "Now you see, your snake's quite the fertility symbol, going about all the time with his whole body spang against the teeming bosom of the Earth Mother and all that."

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"You needn't tell me," Olivia hissed, gone a bit reptilian herself under stress. "I am quite aware of the ancient beliefs. Many early civilizations worshipped the snake as a guarantee of — "

"Oh, aye, fertility's fine when you need more people. But what if you've got enough folks about to be getting on with? What then, eh? Use a snake and you only get more of the same. But your *lizard* — ! Up on its little legs, scurrying about while keeping the teeming bosom of the Earth Mother at arm's length, as it were. Ho, ho! It didn't take a genius to figure out that snakes bring fertility, but the feller who tipped to using lizards to *prevent* fertility from mucking up a person's life, *he* was a ruddy Einstein!"

Now the second part of the procession approached, the women of the village. For the three visitors it was like seeing the church murals come to life. Every female — maiden, mother, and crone — carried an armful of squirming, tail-twitching, scaly-backed lizard. The lizards themselves were far bigger than any breed Olivia had ever surprised in the garden, most being a half yard or more long. The cold of the December dawn did not seem to render them sluggish. Their scales shone with the radiance of fire opals and the grand, fringy crests that ran from the tops of their heads to the tips of their tails erupted into a blaze of gold whenever the sunlight struck them. Smoke rose from the beasts' nostrils as the women sang the second verse of the eerie song:

"Bring forth your lizards, wash them well with soap.

"Bring forth your lizards, thy salvation's hope.

"Jesus was born and in a manger lay.

"Don't tell your lizards; it means nowt to they."

Ham Dethalter left Father Herrick at the edge of Hob's Chimbley and scuttled off. Granny Bones poked the vicar's arm, said, "Here, hold this," thrust Rollo's skull into his hands, and hustled off after Ham. In less time than it takes to tell, the blacksmith and the beldame had set up a long board-and-sawhorse trestle, covering it with a white cloth. The men put down their basins, towels, and cakes of soap, the women put down their lizards, and still singing their anthem, proceeded to suit the action to the word.

"Washing lizards." Olivia was sure that either the world had gone mad or she had. "They are *washing* lizards."

"And what else should they be doing while they sing the Ancient Sussex Lizard-Washing Carol? A bloody Morris dance?" Merlin sighed fondly. "Darling, ain't they? The lizards, I mean. You've not seen their like before,

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I'll wager. Raised by hand from a clutch of eggs old Paisley's great-*great*-grandfather Cuchuli found beside Hob's Chimbley one fine morning."

Olivia gaped, speechless, but Telemachus suffered no such infirmity. "I say, Olivia, this is *ideal*, simply textbook perfect! My God, the symbolism. The lizard as anti-snake, a messenger to the gods requesting *less* fertility, please, thank you very much all the same! The ceremonial washing to remove all taint of possible conception and childbirth — "

"Don't you like children?" Olivia asked in a very small voice.

"I? Oh, I'm mad for them, myself. But this rite is about just the opposite. What a perfect solution to the problems of rural overpopulation. And judging by the evidence of our own eyes, it works!"

Merlin motioned for Father Herrick to join them. "Since you fell down Hob's Chimbley too, I think you ought to take part in the last phase of this ritual along with your friends."

"What?" The vicar dropped Rollo's skull. "But you require virgins to —" Olivia and Telemachus exchanged a knowing look whose implications were not lost on Father Herrick. "My God, it *is* the season of miracles," the clergyman breathed. Turning to Merlin he added coldly, "Very well. What must I do?"

"Hold still," the wizard replied, and gave a come-hither sign to the village ladies.

Olivia found herself beset by lizards. The women draped her, neck to toes, in freshly laundered reptiles. Still singing the Ancient Sussex Lizard-Washing Carol, the ladies went about artistically disposing their scaly charges. Too bemused to protest, Olivia glanced about and saw that Telemachus, too, now resembled a most bizarrely decked Christmas tree. He caught her eye and shrugged as if to say, *When in Greater Ambrose Surlesard...*

"It *is* ever so folkloric," he murmured.

Father Herrick was possessed of no such *laissez aller* attitude. As the first of the village matrons approached him, reptile to the ready, he drew himself up stiffly, remarked, "I think not," and turned his back upon the solemn ritual. Merlin clicked his tongue in marked disapproval, but said nothing.

Olivia yearned to know how long she would be required to wear her living garlands. The beasts' claws were only gentle pinpricks when felt through her ceremonial robe, but although it was no ordeal, neither was it a

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sensation she wished to prolong indefinitely. Unfortunately, her respect for local custom prevented her from saying a word, lest silence be requisite at this point in the rite. She breathed ever so much easier when — soon, if not soon enough for her —the women removed the lizards.

"Arr. Weel, that's done," said Granny Bones with satisfaction. "All t' narsty childer-bearin' powers has been tooken off 'un by t' blest lizards an' has now been put 'pon ye two. And dear 'tis ye've been t' be our help." She pinched Telemachus' waxy cheek until it colored.

"Do you mean we've caught your spare fertility?" Olivia asked.

Granny Bones only laughed and patted Olivia's stomach. The younger woman cast her eyes hastily downward to hide her blushes. Not so hastily, though, as to miss the look of proprietary joy on Telemachus' face as he gazed at her.

"That's quite all right," he said. "Miss Drummond and I both adore children."

"Aye? Best hurry the banns, then." Granny Bones underlined her counsel with a sly wink.

"Am I to assume that you — you have no further need of our services?" Olivia asked.

"Bless t' lass! Nay, 'tis ye'll be havin' some service o' we, by way o' thanks." The crone clapped her hands and Paisley Bloodwell hauled a small wooden chest from beneath the lizard-washing table.

"See aught ye fancy?" the innkeeper asked as he tilted back the lid. Heaps of jewels and gold bedazzled the eye, stole breath from the body. The chest contained the ransom of one king, three dukes, and a baronet. "By way o' souvenir, like, t' help ye remember we wi' some fondness in latter days."

"Oh," Olivia breathed, lifting a gemmed dagger with gold wolf's head hilt from the trove.

"Ahhhh," Telemachus likewise exhaled, extricating a weighty gold torque from the tangle of riches still reposing in the chest.

"Good Lord!" Father Herrick exclaimed, plunging both hands into the wallow of exquisite treasures. And also, "Ouch!" when Paisley Bloodwell slapped his wrists smartly and shut the chest with a snap.

"Them's things as belonged t' our old folks hereabouts, onc't on a time. Trinkets an' gew-gaws wot's been handied down through t' countless generations o' Greater Ambrose. Well, t' four or five generations, any road,

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but still. Them's favors but fer those as *helped* us celebrate this day," the innkeeper said, severe as any headmaster.

"Helped?" The vicar snorted. "Well, why didn't you say so? I'll help you."

"Too late," said Granny Bones. "We be done with t' lizards." And as if to give credence to her words, the lizards now squirmed free of the women's grasp and trundled themselves briskly to the lip of Hob's Chimbley. By ones and twos they peered into the depths and hurled themselves in.

"Oh, the poor things!" Olivia cried.

"Let 'em go," said Merlin. "It's all a part of the rite, lass. What's Yule without a visit to them as is our closest blood ki — ?"

"*I'll* save them!" Father Herrick shouted, drowning out Merlin's words as he bounded after the apparently suicidal reptiles.

"Here, you daft coot, don't do that!" The wizard tried to reach him, but too late.

"You can *thank* me properly when I've rescued them for you," Father Herrick declared. He eyed the treasure box meaningly for an instant before plunging down the shaft after of the last of the lizards.

Merlin's curses rose to heaven on a spiral stair of frosty breath. Olivia attempted to calm the wizard.

"He'll be all right. It's all feathers down there, remember?" she said. "And I don't think he'll land on any of the lizards. Just have someone go fetch the ladder again and — "

"Woman, I *know* he won't land on the lizards," Merlin snapped. "As if any good da'd let some raving git squash his children! Never mind the bloody ladder."

Olivia wanted to ask why not. It was an innocent question, quite reasonable and harmless, but it never did get asked. A roar from below shook the village, flinging everyone but the wizard flat. The trestle collapsed into its component boards and sawhorses. Basins of soapy water tumbled across the snowy ground. A geyser of sulfurous flame gushed from the shaft to overtop the square-built church.

And then there was silence. Merlin gave Olivia a hand up. She clung to him as a shipwreck victim might adhere to a coastal rock and whimpered, "What was *that*?"

The wizard shrugged. "That was Hob."

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Lady Battle-Purfitt had to answer the door herself, all the servants being busy elsewhere. The dark-suited young man tipped his hat to her respectfully.

"M'lady, I believe you're expecting me. Inspector William Jenks, Scotland Yard."

Her ladyship looked ruffled — worse, she looked entirely at sixes and sevens, although the man with the courage to tell her this to her face had not yet been born. "Yes, yes, of course, come in." She shooed him into the nearest room, which turned out to be a rather cramped chamber whose walls were lined with glass-fronted cupboards. Most of the chairs within were occupied by prettily wrapped boxes of various shapes, some already open, some not. "Wedding gifts," her ladyship said briefly. She cleared a place for herself and left the Inspector to his own devices.

"I apologize if I have come at an inconvenient time, m'lady," the Inspector said, moving a large cardboard box to the floor with a hearty thump. "It was unavoidable."

"You have come at *the* most inconvenient time, young man. My only child, my dear son Telemachus is being married today. The ceremony is in point of fact about to begin. I hope you will join us." She made the invitation sound less than inviting.

"Thank you, m'lady, I'd be honored." Inspector Jenks was only capable of picking up clues at the scene of a crime. "What I've got to do here won't take up too much of your time. We're investigating the vanishment of one Father John Herrick, vicar of Staddle-upon-Truss. He was last seen in the company of your son and a Miss Olivia Drummond some time before Christmas."

"Miss Drummond is my son's fiancée."

"Then she'd be here?"

"I believe that is the custom for brides on their wedding day." Lady Battle-Purfitt's voice was hung with frost enough to slaughter a whole crop of garden marrows. "You may speak with her after the ceremony, should you still feel the need. However, I can tell you straight off what has become of Father Herrick. We have, in fact, been expecting you to call for quite some time. I only wonder that it took you so long to investigate the matter."

"His curate fell ill the Sunday after Boxing Day and could not officiate. It was the first time Father Herrick was missed," Inspector Jenks admitted. "His precise whereabouts are a mystery, but — "

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"No mystery. Here he is," said her ladyship. "And here he stays."

"A guest? He might've called someone."

"Hardly. Dead, you know." Lady Battle-Purfitt folded her hands on the skirt of her blue moiré gown. "Drowned. He discovered a bog on the premises of *Earl's Benefice* and insisted it was a sacrificial site. I forbade him to explore it, on the sensible grounds that it was a hazard no sane person would approach too closely. Clearly I misjudged the late vicar's level of common sense. He defied me, seeking it out without my knowledge or consent, having first dispatched my son and Miss Drummond on a wild goose chase to observe some absurd local agricultural custom. They are avid preservationists, you know. On their return, they inquired after him. I said I thought he had gone with them, they were led to believe he had remained behind with me."

"Slippy beggar," the inspector muttered.

"Please, Inspector Jenks, *de mortuis, nil nisi bonum*," her ladyship chided. "We sought, but all we found were a few of his personal effects hard by the bog." She rose majestically and fetched a fountain pen, two pencils, a notebook, and a muddy pamphlet from one of the cupboards. "You may view it and them at your pleasure." She dropped the items in his lap.

Inspector Jenks eyed the pitiful remains, took a small pad from his breast pocket, made a few notes, then closed it with a snap. "Just a quick look at the bog later on, m'lady. Drowned, eh? Poor chap. Tricky things, bogs. Likely we shan't be able to recover the body if it's a deep 'un. Well, can't be helped. We heard as how he was dead keen on ancient lore and all that. Now he's just dead, eh?" His plummy chuckle was left to wither and perish under the blaze of Lady Battle-Purfitt's scornful look.

"If you have no further inquiries to make, will you excuse me?" She gestured toward the door. "The wedding, you know."

"Oh, aye, mustn't detain the festivities, what?" Inspector Jenks was going to jolly up Lady Battle-Purfitt or die in the attempt. Wise money was already being laid as to the design of his coffin. "All quite simple here, cut and dried — only not so dry as all that for poor Father Herrick, I'd say — nothing unusual, case closed, nothing out of the ordinary at all." He was still nattering on as the door closed behind them.

For a time, the room was still. Then the lid of the box which the inspector had dropped to the floor stirred and lifted. A blunt snout protruded, beaky nostrils twitching. A crested head knocked the lid clean off. The box rocked

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back and forth as taloned paws clung to the lip, then the cardboard cube tumbled over onto its side, spilling out its living contents.

The creature crawled across the carpet to where the inspector had let fall Father Herrick's last effects. After a few precursory snuffles it chewed up the pencils with relish, then nibbled the pen. The taste of plastic proved an unpleasant surprise. In a passion, the beast let out a roar that shattered the glass of every cupboard in the room. It lashed its tail and broke a chair leg. Still peeved, it glowered at the muddy pamphlet, the vertical pupils of its yellow eyes thin and unforgiving as the edge of a sword.

A puff of fiery breath and Stilby-Nash's monograph on the strange rites of Greater Ambrose Surlesard was ash.

Satisfied, Hob's child curled its tail around its nose and went to sleep.

"In my last show I was cast as an assistant to a magician."

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Film Editor Harlan Ellison's most recent story for F&SF *("Susan," December, 1993) has been reprinted in two best-of anthologies. He returns to our pages with a story that examines some of the tropes of horror fiction.*

Harlan finished "Sensible City" while on a cruise ship with his wife Susan. "I ain't a cruise kind of guy," Harlan writes. "One day and I was nuts. So I wrote."

Sensible City

By Harlan Ellison

DURING THE THIRD WEEK OF the trial, sworn under oath, one of the Internal Affairs guys the DA's office had planted undercover in Gropp's facility attempted to describe how terrifying Gropp's smile was. The IA guy stammered some; and there seemed to be a singular absence of color in his face; but he tried valiantly, not being a poet or one given to colorful speech. And after some prodding by the Prosecutor, he said:

"You ever, y'know, when you brush your teeth...how when you're done, and you've spit out the toothpaste and the water, and you pull back your lips to look at your teeth, to see if they're whiter, and like that...you know how you tighten up your jaws real good, and make that kind of death-grin smile that pulls your lips back, with your teeth lined up clenched in the front of your mouth...you know what I mean...well..."

Sequestered that night in a downtown hotel, each of the twelve jurors stared into a medicine cabinet mirror and skinned back a pair of lips, and tightened neck muscles till the cords stood out, and clenched teeth, and

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stared at a face grotesquely contorted. Twelve men and women then superimposed over the mirror reflection the face of the Defendant they'd been staring at for three weeks, and approximated the smile they had *not* seen on Gropp's face all that time.

And in that moment of phantom face over reflection face, Gropp was convicted.

Police Lieutenant W.R. Gropp. Rhymed with *crop*. The meat-man who ruled a civic smudge called the Internment Facility when it was listed on the City Council's budget every year. Internment Facility: dripping wet, cold iron, urine smell mixed with sour liquor sweated through dirty skin, men and women crying in the night. A stockade, a prison camp, stalag, ghetto, torture chamber, charnel house, abattoir, duchy, fiefdom, Army co-op mess hall ruled by a neckless thug.

The last of the thirty-seven inmate alumni who had been supoenaed to testify recollected, "Gropp's favorite thing was to take some fool outta his cell, get him nekkid to the skin, then do this *rolling* thing t'him."

When pressed, the former tenant of Gropp's hostelry — not a felon, merely a steamfitter who had had a bit too much to drink and picked up for himself a ten-day Internment Facility residency for D&D — explained that this "rolling thing" entailed, "Gropp wrappin' his big, hairy sausage arm aroun' the guy's neck, see, and then he'd *roll him* across the bars, real hard and fast. Bangin' the guy's head like a roulette ball around the wheel. Clank clank, like that. Usual, it'd knock the guy flat out cold, his head clankin' across the bars and spaces between, wham wham wham like that. See his eyes go up outta sight, all white; but Gropp, he'd hang on with that sausage aroun' the guy's neck, whammin' and bangin' him and takin' some goddam kinda pleasure mentionin' how much bigger this criminal bastard was than *he* was. Yeah, fer sure. That was Gropp's fav'rite part, that he always pulled out some poor nekkid sonofabitch was twice his size.

"That's how four of these guys he's accused of doin', that's how they croaked. With Gropp's sausage 'round the neck. I kept my mouth shut; I'm lucky to get outta there in one piece."

Frightening testimony, last of thirty-seven. But as superfluous as feathers on an eggplant. From the moment of superimposition of phantom face over reflection face, Police Lieutenant W.R. Gropp was on greased rails to spend his declining years for Brutality While Under Color of Service — a

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serious offense — in a maxi-galleria stuffed chockablock with felons whose spiritual brethren he had maimed, crushed, debased, blinded, butchered, and killed.

Similarly destined was Gropp's gigantic Magog, Deputy Sergeant Michael "Mickey" Rizzo, all three hundred and forty pounds of him; brainless malevolence stacked six feet four inches high in his steel-toed, highly-polished service boots. Mickey had only been indicted on seventy counts, as opposed to Gropp's eighty-four ironclad atrocities. But if he managed to avoid Sentence of Lethal Injection for having crushed men's heads underfoot, he would certainly go to the maxi-galleria mall of felonious behavior for the rest of his simian life.

Mickey had, after all, pulled a guy up against the inside of the bars and kept bouncing him till he ripped the left arm loose from its socket, ripped it off, and later dropped it on the mess hall steam table just before dinner assembly.

Squat, bulletheaded troll, Lieutenant W.R. Gropp, and the mindless killing machine, Mickey Rizzo. On greased rails.

So they jumped bail together, during the second hour of jury deliberation.

Why wait? Gropp could see which way it was going, even counting on Blue Loyalty. The city was putting the abyss between the Dept., and him and Mickey. So, why wait? Gropp was a sensible guy, very pragmatic, no bullshit. So they jumped bail together, having made arrangements weeks before, as any sensible felon keen to flee would have done.

Gropp knew a chop shop that owed him a favor. There was a throaty and hemi-speedy, immaculately registered, four-year-old Firebird just sitting in a bay on the fifth floor of a seemingly abandoned garment factory, two blocks from the courthouse.

And just to lock the barn door after the horse, or in this case the Pontiac, had been stolen, Gropp had Mickey toss the chop shop guy down the elevator shaft of the factory. It was the sensible thing to do. After all, the guy's neck *was* broken.

By the time the jury came in, later that night, Lieut. W.R. Gropp was out of the state and somewhere near Boise. Two days later, having taken circuitous routes, the Firebird was on the other side of both the Snake River and the Rockies, between Rock Springs and Laramie. Three days after that, having driven in large circles, having laid over in Cheyenne for dinner and a

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Stick the needle in the brutal sonofabitch. Fill the barrel with a very good brand of weed-killer, stick the needle in the brutal sonofabitch's chest, and slam home the plunger.

movie, Gropp and Mickey were in Nebraska.

Wheat ran to the sun, blue storms bellowed up from horizons, and heat trembled on the edge of each leaf. Crows stirred inside fields, lifted above shattered surfaces of grain and flapped into sky. That's what it looked like: the words came from a poem.

They were smack in the middle of the plains state, above Grand Island, below Norfolk, somewhere out in the middle of nowhere, just tooling along, leaving no trail, deciding to go that way to Canada, or the other way to Mexico. Gropp had heard there were business opportunities in Mazatlan.

It was a week after the jury had been denied the pleasure of seeing Gropp's face as they said, "Stick the needle in the brutal sonofabitch. Fill the barrel with a very good brand of weed-killer, stick the needle in the brutal sonofabitch's chest, and slam home the plunger. Guilty, your honor, guilty on charges one through eighty-four. Give 'im the weed-killer and let's watch the fat scumbag do his dance!" A week of swift and leisurely driving here and there, doubling back and skimming along easily.

And somehow, earlier this evening, Mickey had missed a turnoff, and now they were on a stretch of superhighway that didn't seem to have any important exits. There were little towns now and then, the lights twinkling off in the mid-distance, but if they were within miles of a major metropolis, the map didn't give them clues as to where they might be.

"You took a wrong turn."

"Yeah, huh?"

"Yeah, *exactly* huh. Keep your eyes on the road."

"I'm sorry, Looten'nt."

"No. Not Lieutenant. I told you."

"Oh, yeah, right. Sorry, Mr. Gropp."

"Not Gropp. Jensen. Mister *Jensen*. You're *also* Jensen, my kid brother. Your name is Daniel."

"I got it, I remember: Harold and Daniel Jensen is us. You know

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what I'd like?"

"No, what would you like?"

"A box'a Grape-Nuts. I could have 'em here in the car, and when I got a mite peckish I could just dip my hand in an' have a mouthful. I'd like that."

"Keep your eyes on the road."

"So whaddya think?"

"About what?"

"About maybe I swing off next time and we go into one'a these little towns and maybe a 7-Eleven'll be open, and I can get a box'a Grape-Nuts? We'll need some gas after a while, too. See the little arrow there?"

"I see it. We've still got half a tank. Keep driving."

Mickey pouted. Gropp paid no attention. There were drawbacks to forced traveling companionship. But there were many cul-de-sacs and landfills between this stretch of dark turnpike and New Brunswick, Canada or Mazatlan, state of Sinaloa.

"What is this, the Southwest?" Gropp asked, looking out the side window into utter darkness. "The Midwest? What?"

Mickey looked around, too. "I dunno. Pretty out here, though. Real quiet and pretty."

"It's pitch dark."

"Yeah, huh?"

"Just drive, for godsake. Pretty. Jeezus!"

They rode in silence for another twenty-seven miles, then Mickey said, "I gotta go take a piss."

Gropp exhaled mightily. Where were the cul-de-sacs, where were the landfills? "Okay. Next town of any size, we can take the exit and see if there's decent accommodations. You can get a box of Grape-Nuts, and use the toilet; I can have a cup of coffee and study the map in better light. Does that sound like a good idea, to you...Daniel?"

"Yes, Harold. See, I remembered."

"The world is a fine place."

They drove for another sixteen miles, and came nowhere in sight of a thruway exit sign. But the green glow had begun to creep up from the horizon.

"What the hell is that?" Gropp asked, running down his power window. "Is that some kind of a forest fire, or something? What's that look like to you?"

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"Like green in the sky."

"Have you ever thought how lucky you are that your mother abandoned you, Mickey?" Gropp said wearily. "Because if she hadn't, and if they hadn't brought you to the county jail for temporary housing till they could put you in a foster home, and I hadn't taken an interest in you, and hadn't arranged for you to live with the Rizzos, and hadn't let you work around the lockup, and hadn't made you my deputy, do you have any idea where you'd be today?" He paused for a moment, waiting for an answer, realized the entire thing was rhetorical — not to mention pointless — and said, "Yes, it's green in the sky, pal, but it's also something odd. Have you ever seen 'green in the sky' before? Anywhere? Any time?"

"No, I guess I haven't." Gropp sighed, and closed his eyes.

They drove in silence another nineteen miles, and the green miasma in the air enveloped them. It hung above and around them like sea-fog, chill and with tiny droplets of moisture that Mickey fanned away with the windshield wipers. It made the landscape on either side of the superhighway faintly visible, cutting the impenetrable darkness, but it also induced a wavering, ghostly quality to the terrain.

Gropp turned on the map light in the dome of the Firebird, and studied the map of Nebraska. He murmured, "I haven't got a rat's-fang of any idea where the hell we *are*! There isn't even a freeway like this indicated here. You took some helluva wrong turn 'way back there, pal!" Dome light out.

"I'm sorry, Loo-Harold..."

A large reflective advisement marker, green and white, came up on their right. It said: FOOD GAS LODGING 10 MILES.

The next sign said: EXIT 7 MILES.

The next sign said: OBEDIENCE 3 MILES.

Gropp turned the map light on again. He studied the venue. "Obedience? What the hell kind of 'Obedience'? There's nothing like that *anywhere*. What is this, an old map? Where did you get this map?"

"Gas station."

"Where?"

"I dunno. Back a long ways. That place we stopped with the root beer stand next to it."

Gropp shook his head, bit his lip, murmured nothing in particular. "Obedience," he said. "Yeah, huh?"

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They began to see the town off to their right before they hit the exit turnoff. Gropp swallowed hard and made a sound that caused Mickey to look over at him. Gropp's eyes were large, and Mickey could see the whites.

"What'sa matter, Loo...Harold?"

"You see that town out there?" His voice was trembling.

Mickey looked to his right. Yeah, he saw it. Horrible.

Many years ago, when Gropp was briefly a college student, he had taken a warm-body course in Art Appreciation. One oh one, it was; something basic and easy to ace, a snap, all you had to do was show up. Everything you wanted to know about Art from aboriginal cave drawings to Diego Rivera. One of the paintings that had been flashed on the big screen for the class, a sleepy 8:00 AM class, had been *The Nymph Echo* by Max Ernst. A green and smoldering painting of an ancient ruin overgrown with writhing plants that seemed to have eyes and purpose and a malevolently jolly life of their own, as they swarmed and slithered and overran the stone vaults and altars of the twisted, disturbingly resonant sepulcher. Like a sebaceous cyst, something corrupt lay beneath the emerald fronds and hungry black soil.

Mickey looked to his right at the town. Yeah, he saw it. Horrible.

"Keep driving!" Gropp yelled, as his partner-in-flight started to slow for the exit ramp.

Mickey heard, but his reflexes were slow. They continued to drift to the right, toward the rising egress lane. Gropp reached across and jerked the wheel hard to the left. "I said: *keep driving*!"

The Firebird slewed, but Mickey got it back under control in a moment, and in another moment they were abaft the ramp, then past it, and speeding away from the nightmarish site beyond and slightly below the superhighway. Gropp stared mesmerized as they swept past. He could see buildings that leaned at obscene angles, the green fog that rolled through the haunted streets, the shadowy forms of misshapen things that skulked at every dark opening.

"That was a real scary-lookin' place, Looten...Harold. I don't think I'd of wanted to go down there even for the Grape-Nuts. But maybe if we'd've gone real fast..."

Gropp twisted in the seat toward Mickey as much as his muscle-fat body would permit. "Listen to me. There is this tradition, in horror movies, in mysteries, in tv shows, that people are always going into haunted houses, into

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graveyards, into battle zones, like assholes, like stone idiots! You know what I'm talking about here? Do you?"

Mickey said, "Uh..."

"All right, let me give you an example. Remember we went to see that movie *Alien*? Remember how scared you were?"

Mickey bobbled his head rapidly, his eyes widened in frightened memory.

"Okay. So now, you remember that part where the guy who was a mechanic, the guy with the baseball cap, he goes off looking for a cat or somedamnthing? Remember? He left everyone else, and he wandered off by himself. And he went into that big cargo hold with the water dripping on him, and all those chains hanging down, and shadows everywhere...*do you recall that*?"

Mickey's eyes were chalky potholes. He remembered, oh yes; he remembered clutching Gropp's jacket sleeve till Gropp had been compelled to slap his hand away.

"And you remember what happened in the movie? In the theater? You remember everybody yelling, 'Don't go in there, you asshole! The thing's in there, you moron! Don't go in there!' But, remember, he *did*, and the thing came up behind him all those teeth, and it bit his stupid head off! Remember that?"

Mickey hunched over the wheel, driving fast.

"Well, that's the way people are. They ain't sensible! They go into places like that, you can see are death places; and they get chewed up or the blood sucked outta their necks or used for kindling...but I'm no moron, I'm a sensible guy and I got the brains my mama gave me, and I don't go *near* places like that. So drive like a sonofabitch, and get us outta here, and we'll get your damned Grape-Nuts in Idaho or somewhere...if we ever get off this road..."

Mickey murmured, "I'm sorry, Lieuten'nt. I took a wrong turn or somethin'."

"Yeah, yeah. Just keep driv — " The car was slowing.

It was a frozen moment. Gropp exultant, no fool he, to avoid the cliché, to stay out of that haunted house, that ominous dark closet, that damned place. Let idiot others venture off the freeway, into the town that contained the basement entrance to Hell, or whatever. Not he, not Gropp!

He'd outsmarted the obvious.

In that frozen moment.

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As the car slowed. Slowed, in the poisonous green mist.

And on their right, the obscenely frightening town of Obedience, that they had left in their dust five minutes before, was coming up again on the superhighway.

"Did you take another turnoff?"

"Uh...no, I...uh, I been just driving fast..."

The sign read: NEXT RIGHT 50 YDS. OBEDIENCE.

The car was slowing. Gropp craned his neckless neck to get a proper perspective on the fuel gauge. He was a pragmatic kind of a guy, no nonsense, and very practical; but they were out of gas.

The Firebird slowed and slowed and finally rolled to a stop.

In the rearview mirror Gropp saw the green fog rolling up thicker onto the roadway; and emerging over the berm, in a jostling, slavering horde, clacking and drooling, dropping decayed body parts and leaving glistening trails of worm ooze as they dragged their deformed pulpy bodies across the blacktop, their snake-slit eyes gleaming green and yellow in the mist, the residents of Obedience clawed and slithered and crimped toward the car.

It was common sense any Better Business Bureau would have applauded: if the tourist trade won't come to your town, take your town to the tourists. Particularly if the freeway has forced commerce to pass you by. Particularly if your town needs fresh blood to prosper. Particularly if you have the civic need to share.

Green fog shrouded the Pontiac, and the peculiar sounds that came from within. Don't go into that dark room is a sensible attitude. Particularly in a sensible city.

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SCIENCE

BRUCE STERLING

THE ARTIFICIAL BODY

THE NATURAL marvel that is the human body has always far surpassed the halting productions of human artifice. When the body fails, and artifice becomes necessary, then people make do as best they can.

Designing and building the artificial body has always been a halting business. Whenever financing has been available, then the artificial body has generally been built from the most advanced technologies and materials available at the time. However, even the best artifice has always proven to be sadly inadequate.

In the late 1700s, George Washington suffered with his famous wooden dentures. The fictional Captain Ahab of the 1800s had a very technologically appropriate pegleg of whale ivory. Today, at the end of the 1900s, artificial body parts are mostly adaptations from one of our century's most prestigious technologies: aerospace.

In the most advanced economies of the 1990s, the artificial substances that people attach to their bodies, or implant inside their bodies, are commonly "space-age materials": epoxies, fibers, lightweight metals, and high-tech, high-performance ceramics and plastics.

Throughout its long history, the artificial body industry has been a technological magpie, co-opting any number of alien engineering traditions in crude attempts to mimic the body's superb organic functions. The artificial kidney, the greatest success story of the artificial organ field, serves as the standard paradigm for this biotechnological design process. Fifty years ago, Willem Kolff, a Dutch doctor working in the extremely unpromising milieu of Nazi-occupied Holland, began work on the world's first artificial kidney. Dr.

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Kolff's kidney dialysis machine was basically a retrofitted washing-machine, a centrifuge in a rotating drum. Dr. Kolff's ungainly device was meant to mimic the natural function of the elegant, fist-sized human kidney, in cleansing and filtering human blood.

No one but a doomed patient would agree to be hooked up to such a device; but in the 1940s, kidney failure was a uniformly lethal illness. Dr. Kolff found no lack of volunteers.

All his early patients died. After years of untold suffering by patients, and ceaseless heroic struggle by their doctor, a few of Dr. Kolff's later patients survived — and then lived for longer and longer periods, with less and less distress. It slowly became clear to all that the artificial kidney was not some farfetched gadget, but a workable, practical medical advance that gave patients years of productive life. The technology spread through the medical community, and was developed steadily by teams of designers all over the industrialized world, in a patient, step-by-step process of incremental improvement. Today there are almost half a million people living through kidney dialysis, and the machines themselves, which used to weigh a ton or so and were the size of refrigerators, are now about the size of a desktop photocopier.

It should be pointed out, however, that a kidney dialysis machine does not "cure" anyone. It substitutes a machine for a malfunctioning human organ. The machine does not work anywhere near so well as a natural human kidney, but since the alternative is a painful death, the machine is gratefully accepted.

Since Dr. Kolff's breakthrough, medical science has become more and more ambitious in attaching or implanting industrial materials to the human body. The artificial body industry has become a broad and deep and varied enterprise.

Orthopedic prostheses and orthoses, artificial limbs and braces, serve a patient population of one and a half million Americans with amputations. A more ambitious cousin technology, artificial knee joints, hip joints, and fracture fixations, are implanted within the body.

There are ophthalmic systems: contact lenses (a little-recognized, but extremely common artificial prosthesis). The cousin technology is surgically implanted intraocular lenses.

Three hundred thousand people worldwide have implanted heart pacemakers. Cardiovascular implants come in a wide variety: vascular grafts, defibrillators, cardioverters, artificial heart valves, even entire

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artificial hearts. Artificial hearts have received a great deal of press and consumed a great deal of research funding, but they are still on the fringes of technological workability.

There are reconstructive implants: facial reconstruction, breast reconstruction, penile implants. Silicone breast implants have proved to be one of the greatest medical disasters of the twentieth century, causing anguish to their recipients and wrecking entire multinational corporations in billion-dollar medical lawsuits.

There are dental implants, and neural implants for artificial cochleas, and implanted hydrocephalic shunts.

Millions of people undergo general surgical procedures each year. It's little recognized that modern surgical procedures can leave a minor arsenal of foreign substances within the human body: sutures, staples, tissue adhesives, collagen plugs.

The inside of the human body is a very harsh environment for any kind of foreign object, especially complex machinery. Blood is corrosive: it's hot seawater, essentially, and always in motion. The tissues of the body bend, stretch, agitate, and are subject to sudden shocks. The human body is not some inert mechanical factory; it is a biological system that grows, adapts, metabolizes, changes shape, and reacts profoundly to its circumstances. The human body attacks embedded foreign objects through sophisticated immune reactions: inflammatory responses, antigens, macrophages, lymphocytes, fibroblasts.

Infection and contagion pose grave risks whenever the integrity of the body is violated by human artifice. Hostile bacteria, which are present pretty much throughout the planet's ecosystem, will invade the body after surgical trauma, or if any opening is left through the protective barrier of skin. Even successfully closing the wounds of surgery does not necessarily prevent a consequent infection, because the human body is not a single, clean, genetic entity. The human body is a flourishing garden of commensal bacteria. Normally quiescent organisms, such as staphylococcus, yeast, pseudomonas, or escherischia, can become deadly when they colonize the surface of some foreign object implanted inside the body.

An artificial body part, therefore, faces severe design constraints. It must be biocompatible and chemically inert. It must have the right mechanical properties: the requisite shear, stress, strain, Young's modulus of elasticity, the right tensile strength and

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temperature-related properties.

What kind of materials fit that description? At this technological point in time, mostly "space age" materials: lightweight, strong, corrosion-resistant. Specialized metals, ceramics and plastics.

Teflon, for instance, is the proverbial space-age spinoff. Teflon is used to line frying pans, but has also seen use in artificial organs: eustachian tubes, vitreous humors of the eye, veins and arteries, bladders, uteri, intestinal walls.

Nylon: for lenses, hip implants, sutures, and insulated lining for inserted power-cables for pacemakers and other implanted electrical devices.

Silicone gel and silicone rubber: for breasts, ears, noses, cheeks, skulls and teeth, and also for implanted drug delivery systems.

Graphite and carbon-fiber: for tendons.

Cyanoacrylate superglues for tissue adhesives in surgery.

And space-age metals: stainless steel for hips, knees, shoulders, wrists, elbows, skulls, and teeth; for bone-screws and plate screws. The commonest implanted stainless steel is a special surgical alloy known as Type 316-L, of chromium, nickel, molybdenum, carbon and iron.

Titanium for hipjoints. Cobalt-chrome alloys for sockets. Platinum, mostly for electrodes.

And the ceramics: alumina and zirconia, primarily. Ceramics are particularly promising substances for the artificial body because of their great biocompatibility. Some modern bioceramics are not merely bio-inert, but "bio-active" — in other words, the ceramic is mistaken by the body for a natural substance such as tooth or bone. Human cells quickly adhere directly to the surface of the ceramic. In some circumstances, the ceramic will be dissolved and replaced by new growth of genuine body tissue. One commercial bioceramic, calcium-phosphate based "hydroxylapatite," is a major natural component of human bone. Used as a ceramic coating for other implants, hydroxylapatite can greatly improve the body/artifice interface.

The human femur offers some good examples of the variety of technological approaches to the artificial body. The femur is the longest bone in the human leg. Its lower end meets the kneecap, and its top has a flange-and-ball configuration known as the "condyle head." The condyle head of the femur rotates inside a socket in the pelvis.

The femur has to support the human body in movement, and is subject to a great deal of mechanical

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stress. Hip replacement prosthesis commonly becomes necessary as the body ages. Femurs often break through accident or misadventure.

In the past, truly severe damage to the femur generally resulted in amputation and a prosthesis, but this was a counsel of despair. A far better approach is to mechanically augment the damaged femur inside the living flesh, thereby saving and healing the leg. As body parts go, the femur is relatively simple. Its moving parts are large enough to see, so augmenting its mechanical properties is fairly straightforward. It is joiners' work, basically; the sort of thing a carpenter might do for the broken leg of a chair. One sets the remnants of the femur back in place, bridges the break with a sturdy, stainless-steel plate, and then attaches both ends of the plate to sound areas of the femur, with metal bonescrews. When the flesh heals after surgery, then the femur, with its new steel reinforcement, will once again bear the weight of the patient.

This technique works fairly well — but not over the long term. The difficulty arises because the human femur is not, in fact, a chairleg. Although it obeys the very same laws of engineering and physics as a mechanical device, a femur is not a mechanical device at all, but a reactive part of a living organism. Bone depends on stress. Bone grows and maintains itself in response to the stress loads upon it. Bone which is not hard at work scaffolding the body seems to the body to be superfluous tissue. Therefore, the substance of that bone will be slowly dissolved away, and excreted or redeposited elsewhere.

Typical cemented or bolted implants shield the underlying bone from the natural stresses. The metal prosthesis ends up doing all the work while the living bone beneath it wastes away. Over time, this loosens the attachment of the plate to the bone. Eventually the plate will break free.

The next technological step in the artificial body process is to improve the basic materials. Suppose, for instance, that one is doing a standard femur-hipjoint replacement because the organic joint has worn out (typically through bone disease or arthritis). Rather than stainless steel, one might use a machined-titanium femur. Titanium is lighter and more tissue-friendly than steel, with a porous surface that attracts and anchors human cell growth. The titanium condyle head can be fitted into a cobalt-chrome artificial pelvis socket, with a matching rotation-cup of ultra-high-molecular weight polyethylene.

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These light, flexible, relatively bio-inert space-age materials are a big improvement over the rasping movements of steel against steel. Better materials make more sophisticated body-replacement efforts feasible.

But there is still a great deal of room for technical improvement. As time goes on, the body continues to replace and maintain itself, while mechanical parts can only wear mechanically. Dense polyethylene is a very tough material, but with constant wear under the repeated stresses of walking, the plastic begins to abrade. Tiny particles flake from the surface of the plastic socket cup. These particles are caught up inside the bloodstream. They are commonly swept inside the femur, where the femur's bone marrow is busily manufacturing red blood cells. Plastic sediment migrates inside the femur and ends up choking and killing bone marrow. At the interface of the bone and titanium, the bone cells lose circulation and nutrients. They die, and are absorbed by the bloodstream. Once again, the integrity of the artificial femur is threatened.

The next technical fix is yet another improvement in materials: the move from polyethylene, cobalt, chrome and titanium to high-tech bioceramics such as zirconia. These ceramics also wear, but, unlike plastic, tiny chips of ceramic can be readily dissolved and metabolized by the body.

Yet another stage of artificial body design is on the technological horizon today. This approach is, by contemporary standards, truly sophisticated. This is a design process in true sympathy with the body's organic processes. After all, human bone is not some rigid engineering structure that is mechanically thrust into the body in the way that girders brace a skyscraper. Natural bone is produced by gentle, cellular, liquid processes of mineralized deposition.

New technological approaches follow nature's lead more closely. One such as the experimental medical use of a substance known as "bone putty." Bone putty is a mixture of dicalcium phosphate dihydrate and tetra calcium phosphate. When combined, the two substances form a kind of organic epoxy. Inside the wet tissues of the body, the two chemicals react, and they precipitate hydroxyl apatite, a tough, rigid, natural constituent of actual human bone.

Bone putty can be mixed with dissolvable suture fibers, or a web of tough carbon filaments for reinforcement. When those sutures or filaments eventually dissolve inside the body, they leave useful channels

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through the artificial bone, where bone cells can migrate and veins and arteries can grow. Eventually, real bone permeates through the entire texture of the putty implant. Ideally, over many years, the patient is left with no trace of the artificial implant —he or she recovers fully to walk on an actual human femur.

What we have, then, is a kind of three-stage process of evolution in artificial body design. First, steel plates that attempt to solve the immediate problem by brute mechanical force. Second, passive biomaterials such as homogenous plastics and ceramics which do not actually insult the tissues of the body. Third, composite, bio-active materials which encourage the body to grow through them and absorb them.

A similar design logic applies to artificial organs. The kidney dialysis machine, for all its mechanical sophistication, is still just a mechanical pump and filter. Compare that to the proposed and still unapproved artificial pancreas. The experimental artificial pancreas is an implant which is dependent, not on clanking and whirring machinery, but on sophisticated membrane technology. Living and growing pancreatic cells are encapsulated in a coiled tube of semipermeable membrane, a co-polymer of polyvinyl chloride and poly acrylonitrile. The coiled tube of membrane is wound up like an intestine, inside an open plastic frame about the size of a hockey puck.

Glucose and insulin can penetrate the membrane, and will be successfully metabolized by the trapped pancreas cells, just like a natural pancreas. But large human immune cells cannot penetrate the membrane; therefore there is no danger of an immune reaction. The pancreatic cells can come from a noncompatible donor, or perhaps even from another species entirely. This device has been successfully tested for up to six months in laboratory dogs.

The next logical step would seem to be artificial human organs which are not, in fact, "substitute" organs at all and scarcely even artificial. Organ transplantation is a thriving modern enterprise, but in many ways this practice remains very problematic. Besides the persistent problem of organ rejection, there are chronic organ-donor shortages, and also grave risks with unintentional transfers of disease. In May 1991, for instance, a young deceased organ donor was discovered to be a carrier of the AIDS virus. The process of organ transplantation had been so swift and thorough that fifty-six of the dead man's body parts had already been distributed

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and grafted into patients all across the United States. A frantic search had to be launched for the recipients of these human body parts.

A more sophisticated approach would involve growing replicas of the patient's own organs outside his or her body; for instance, liver tissue grown cell by cell on a biodegradable matrix of polymer sponge such as surgical Gelfoam. The technical ability to maintain solutions of living cells outside the body could be of enormous value. Entire new body parts might be grown, or artificial body parts could be pre-soaked in baths of the patient's own genetically identical cells. When the mechanical body part was eventually introduced inside the body, it would come with a living coating of human cells attached that identified it as part of the patient's own body. The rejection process could be defeated entirely outside the body, and the patient would not have to run the very considerable risks involved in having his immune system artificially repressed.

The artificial body has always used the most sophisticated materials available. Today those materials are mostly aerospace materials, even though the design of high-performance aircraft has basically nothing to do with the natural functions of a human body. But certain emergent technologies: membrane technologies, genetic engineering, drug design, artificial life simulations, computer-aided modelling, nano-engineering, and the deliberate industrial mimicry of biological production processes — are fields of study that are directly related to the body. When those emergent technologies mature and begin yielding their harvest of new materials and new design techniques, then the artificial body will achieve an entirely new level of techno-medical sophistication.

The artificial body at the end of the twentieth century is obviously a very primitive enterprise. None of our prosthetic substitutes work anywhere near so well as the human body itself works. But a more important harbinger for the next century is that none of the products of human artifice work *much better* than natural human organs.

After all, the human body has never been a designed or engineered object. The human body is an evolved organism. From a Darwinian perspective, the body has evolved through "blind watchmaker" processes of adaptation and reproduction on a genetic level, on a species level. The human body is not optimized for performance as an individual device. Every human body is very mortal, a

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victim of built-in organic obsolescence. The human body reaches peak performance in childbearing and child-rearing years, and after that, the body begins an inexorable process of natural decay.

Intelligence and conscious design techniques have only recently been brought to bear on this ancient organic legacy — the status quo of the human condition. For centuries, we human beings have used our technologies primarily to dominate the physical world outside ourselves. When we have applied technology directly to our own bodies, it has generally been a halting and desperate act, as a partial correction for some flaw. But what will happen when we can be retrofitted with engineered components that exceed the performance of the natural body?

The popularity of elective plastic surgery, bodybuilding, and tattooing shows that our culture, far more than any culture in history, is mentally preparing itself to deliberately embrace the artificial body. It should prove a memorable encounter.

It's cold outside... better wear your mittens... Young man! Don't pretend you can't hear me... you're not so big I can't put you over my knee! Hey! HEY!

Nanotechnology

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"White Walls" is Stephen Kraus's third sale to F&SF. *(His other two appearances were "Behind the Barrier" in December, 1990, and "In the Land of Grass" in August, 1992.)*

He says the idea for "White Walls" came from a conversation he had with a man who worked in a clean room where silicon wafers are fabricated for integrated circuits. "Astonishing precautions have to be taken to avoid dust contamination — showers, complex air filtration systems, special suits, washdowns. It's as if he were entering a different world every time he goes to work. I wondered what would happen if people had to live in an environment like that permanently."

White Walls

By Stephen Kraus

"RUN THAT AGAIN," JACOBSON said.

The system obliged immediately, respectful of Jacobson's priority. The image on the monitor reset to the first security checkpoint. Fish-eyed optics stared out through glass doors to a broad plaza lined with olive trees. The glass doors opened, and a single figure walked through uncertainly. The camera zoomed in, focused. The camera-robot's point of view was only a few centimeters off the floor: the subject seemed to taper upwards, face all nostrils.

The robot scuttled backward on rubber treads. The figure framed in its camera-eye was clearly female now from the less extreme angle. The robot issued a command, repeated it. The woman followed hesitantly, glancing back toward the checkpoint and the glass doors and the sunlight beyond.

The robot's servos whined. For a moment, the woman's dark, frightened eyes stared straight into the camera. Jacobson flinched, as if she could see him watching. She brushed her long black hair back nervously with her hand, seeking protection in its thickness and its familiarity. Her face was striking

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— fine, sharp-boned features with a distant, mournful look. But it was her walk that held Jacobson's attention: tuned, exact, every movement under absolute control. The clean precision of her steps and the swing of her arms and hips made him realize how complex a process walking really was, and how badly most people did it.

The mild summer afternoon, still visible through the doors behind her, vanished as she turned a corner. She moved between white walls now, raked by fluorescent glare. The harsh light bled all the color from her narrow face; the planes and angles of her cheekbones shone hard as knives.

Jacobson leaned back in his chair, tented his fingers. Except for the display, his office was dark. There were no windows, no carpeting, only blank enamel-white walls too distant to reflect the glow from the monitor.

"Subject's name?" Jacobson asked. He wondered why he was watching this sequence. He'd just happened on it by chance while browsing through the system. Her name wasn't any of his business.

"Establish your need to know."

"I have none. Tell me anyway."

The system hesitated for a moment. "Julia Sholokov."

"Why is she here?"

"She's a subject for robot articulation studies. Transferred from Santa Clara."

"Ah," said Jacobson. "Whose project?"

"Kirkendahl's."

The woman reached the second checkpoint. A burly technician brushed her clothes, then directed her to step into a pair of white booties. She passed through a sighing airlock and ended up in a room with lockers along one wall. Another technician checked her ID card, pointed to a set of gleaming tiled showers and pantomimed changing into fresh white coveralls. He didn't say a word. Outer fringe staff avoided speaking to inbound personnel. Jacobson had never really understood why. Perhaps they didn't want to shout over the restless howl of the air recirculators. Or perhaps they assumed those coming inside were incapable of speech, confusing them with the robots they designed.

Julia removed her government-issue coveralls, glancing over at the technician before unsealing each seam. She needn't have bothered. He had his back to her. Fringe staff never looked inward. But the security robot's

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camera-eye stared relentlessly at her slim, small-breasted body. It seemed asexual in the blue-white glare and rising steam. Even naked, she moved with a precise, fluid grace.

In the next room another technician scrubbed her suit down and fitted her with a hood and a filter mask that covered her mouth.

"What's happening?" she asked. Her voice was deeper than Jacobson expected, with a tense, vulnerable edge. The mask added a slight rasp. "Is there some kind of contamination?"

The technician shook his head, friendlier than the others. Inside staff. "From here on in it's a class 100 cleanroom environment. *You're* the contaminant."

She stepped through another airlock, seemed disoriented for a second, then leaned forward into a roaring wind that stripped particles from her skin.

"Where is she going?" Jacobson asked. Some quality in her posture, in her eyes drew his attention, something rare and terribly fragile. It made him feel protective.

"She has an interview with the director," the system replied.

Jacobson rubbed his nose, wondering why.

The template waited in clear fluid, silicon carved to atomic precision. Bases drifted by, guanine, cytosine, adenine. Then thymine, the right one at last. It tumbled above the polished surface, gyrated, twisted, and finally dropped into an L-shaped depression on the template. Molecular locks clicked shut.

A stocky, fortyish woman nodded, and moved her hand across a touch-panel. "That was the last one."

Jacobson paced between white walls, booties scuffing clean tiles. "Okay, Alice. Detach it." He felt restless, distracted. His thoughts keep returning to the thin young woman with the precise walk.

An electrical pulse set up a standing wave on the template. The strand it held rippled irritably for a time, unwilling to leave the surface. Finally it lifted clear.

"Encase it," Jacobson said. "Use a T-4 phage sheath. I'll be in my office. Let me know when you're done."

His assistant turned away from her monitor. She always sat too close to the display, and now it soaked her face in a dull amber glow. "Don't you want

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to watch?"

But Jacobson was already cycling through the airlock.

"Cue to the interview."

The system complied. Julia walked through a sliding door into a bare room. The entire ceiling shone, achingly bright. The director stood near the back wall with his arms crossed. He wore a reflective fishbowl helmet and a loose white suit that disguised his slight build. The airlock door slid shut. Julia's security robot rolled unobtrusively into a corner. The two figures loomed in the confined space.

The director walked in a circle, his arms still crossed.

"Julia Sholokov?" He spoke in a piping *castrato* tenor that lent his words an incongruous enthusiasm.

She nodded and looked around nervously, perhaps for some place to sit down. There was nothing.

"You're a dancer, am I right?"

"Yes. No. I was. I'm an Associated Municipalities conscript now."

The director waved her last comment aside. "Are you a good dancer?"

She didn't answer for a second. "I suppose so...sir."

He took a step closer to her. "Take off your suit."

"Pardon me?"

"Remove your coveralls, please."

Jacobson froze, his face centimeters from the monitor. His fingers gripped the edge of his desk. *What was the director doing?* He was a strange man: insular, unpredictable, easily agitated. But this made no sense. He'd never shown any interest in women before, much less...

The image blurred, then refocused. Julia pushed the white suit down over her legs, her arms shaking noticeably. She reached up to touch her hair, for reassurance, and found only a plastic hood.

"Dance," the director said.

She put her hands to her face. She may have been crying; the robot's optics weren't good enough to tell.

The director took a step closer. "You'll be naked in the articulation lab."

She looked up. "I will?"

"Of course. We're designing robots that mimic human movement. You're their rule base, their teacher. Robots don't wear clothes."

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She nodded tentatively.

"Dance," he said.

After a minute she moved an arm to one side. She lifted to her toes, knelt. She closed her eyes, listening for some rhythm in the white noise of the recirculators. She straightened one leg and posed, bent it again and turned. She kept her eyes tightly shut.

The director let her continue for several minutes. "All right," he said abruptly. "Very good."

She stopped.

"We had another woman in a month ago. Very nervous. She couldn't stop shaking. You're quite natural."

Julia touched her cap again. "What happened to her?"

"She's dead."

Jacobson tried to extract more information from that statement. He didn't remember the other woman, hadn't ever met her. But the director's voice conveyed no regret, no irony, no threat. Only fact.

His gaze was very steady, but it was impossible to tell where he was looking. Julia seemed uncertain whether to dress.

"How long will I have to stay here?" she asked evenly, knowing she'd earned a question.

The director seemed taken aback. "A few months, I suppose. You'll have to ask Kirkendahl. He knows the details." He locked his hands behind his back, finally looking away. "I imagine it's difficult at first, coming in here. All the procedures, the discipline. There isn't a lot of that outside, is there? Mandated decentralization, multiple governments vying for conscripts. What do they call it? The Chaos? We don't see any of that. It's clean here, orderly. You're safe. Safer than anywhere else on Earth. There aren't any contaminants or carcinogens or ionizing radiation. There isn't a particle in the air larger than a virus. I can't even imagine going back out there now. None of us can."

He faced her again. He seemed to be smiling beneath his helmet. "You can get dressed. I'm sorry if I alarmed you. You have an important part to play in our work. I had to be sure of you."

"Shut it off," Jacobson said. He had to wait a minute until his voice was steady. "Shut the damned thing off."

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Jacobson pushed back the chair at the end of the long table and stood up. Meetings made him restless. "Questions?" he asked.

"Is anything happening with the microwave power proposal?"

Jacobson looked down the table toward a young, dreadlocked project manager. "Faultline Admin is still reviewing it; that's as much as I know."

"They've been reviewing it for three months. I haven't had anything to work on since July."

Jacobson sighed. "I know."

Alice Freeman, Jacobson's assistant, raised her hand. "We're down to six real projects and some maintenance stuff. How are we going to keep this place going?"

The rest of the staff murmured nervously.

Jacobson rubbed his forehead. Alice was right. Contracts hadn't been coming in at the usual rate. Something was changing outside; there was some subtle, incomprehensible shift in the Chaos.

"We've been through this before," Jacobson said. "The director always sees the trends, keeps us positioned, keeps us independent. He's been doing it for ten years."

"You're putting a lot of faith in someone whose face none of us have ever seen," Alice muttered.

"What's he planning now? Do you know?"

Jacobson looked up. He wasn't sure who had asked. It could have been any of the dozen nervous faces around the table. None of them, even the recent arrivals, could conceive of a life outside, in the chaos beyond the white walls. Jacobson least of all.

"The director hasn't confided in me — "

A wall monitor brightened, resolving into a screen-filling view of the director's helmet. His features moved elusively behind it.

Thank god, Jacobson thought.

The flute-like voice started in without preamble: "I know that some of you have been concerned about the air quality in the lab."

Several staff members spoke at once.

"When are we getting some new business?"

"What's going on outside? We have less and less contact."

The director stepped back from the camera. He had his hands locked behind his back. "I wanted to outline my plans for upgrading the central eight

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stages from class 100 to class 10."

"It's a tape," Greg Kirkendahl said, almost whining. "You can't even talk to the man in real-time. It's dehumanizing."

Jacobson looked from one tense face to the next, waiting for the clamor to subside. He knew what he had to say. He'd tell them that the director was a genius, a magician with the power to keep the Chaos from touching his domain. They'd believe him, accept whatever he said.

They didn't have a choice.

A THOUSAND LASER beams converged, green pinpoints darting like startled fish. At the periphery, engineers faced away, looking at monitors where the pinpoints, isolated, defined arms, legs, a torso, a neck. But Jacobson watched the envelope of light itself, the miniature galaxy of blazing green stars.

"Okay," said Kirkendahl, "turn toward me and lift your arm again. Keep the elbow bent." He sounded distracted. His flat, nasal voice ran the words together.

Julia twisted around smoothly and lifted her arm.

"No. I'm trying to get the interaction between the biceps and the brachialis. You have to flex your arm more. That's better. Yes, just so. Once more." He stood up; a tall, angular man, unbending in sections, like a paper clip. "Okay. That's enough. Let's shut down for a while."

The lasers vanished, and the nexus of light became a woman in a black skinsuit trimmed, like a cabaret costume, with rows of tiny reflectors. She blinked, adjusting. Jacobson stared straight into her eyes. He didn't offer his hand. No one touched inside.

"I'm Alex Jacobson."

She nodded slightly. Her face was closed, registering nothing. She'd already learned a little about protecting herself.

"How long has this session been going?" he asked.

"I don't know. Four or five hours."

She looked different close up; there was a softness to her face that the camera missed. Perspiration beaded above her eyes, at the borders of her mask.

"Kirkendahl can get absorbed, lose track. I'll tell him to ease off."

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"I'm doing fine," she said coolly.

He looked straight at her, forcing her to look back. "I don't think so. I don't think 'fine' is the right word at all."

She searched his eyes for a moment, wondering whether to trust him.

"Can I get you something to drink?" he asked.

Her face changed beneath her mask, opened up. "Oh god, yes."

The offer was consequential enough. He had to cycle through an airlock and a scrub station to return with a pair of squeezeboxes. Julia drained hers in one long pull.

"Thank you. Are you in charge or something?"

Jacobson shook his head. "I'm responsible for the science done here. That's all."

"That strange little man...he runs this place, then?"

"The director, yes. His name is Blankman, but I think I'm the only one who calls him that."

"I met him on my first day...." She shivered. "Can I go back to my room now?"

"Of course. I'll escort you."

He spoke to Kirkendahl while she changed back into her coveralls. The tall man nodded rapidly a few times, then returned to his displays.

They walked outward three decontamination stages, down a long white corridor.

"Why isn't there anything on the walls here?" she asked. "It all looks the same. I walk and I walk, and I feel like I haven't moved."

Her security robot paced them, squealing slightly. Its camera head swiveled.

"We have to keep particulates down. We can't give dust anywhere to collect."

"Why do you all care so much about dust?"

No one had ever asked him that. It took a minute to remember why. "We do a lot of silicon fabrication. We carve depressions in wafer surfaces the size of individual molecules. Can't let any particles settle. A dust grain looks like an asteroid at our scale."

She pointed at the bare walls. "But does it have to be like this everywhere?"

He stopped walking. The corridor narrowed to a vanishing point ahead

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of them. "No, not really. We've gotten a little compulsive about it."

"You keep saying *we*. All of you?"

"No. The director sets the policies. He takes a...special interest in the air quality in the lab."

"The director again." She closed her eyes. "He scarcely seems human. He told me that I'd be naked in that...that robotics lab, or whatever it is."

Jacobson shook his head. "That wouldn't make sense. You need a contrast between the laser reflectors and the background."

"Was he being cruel or just ignorant?"

The security robot rocked back and forth impatiently. Jacobson started walking again.

"Let's talk about something else."

She sighed. "What else can he do to me?"

Jacobson thought about that. He'd contrived a sort of life for himself here, between the white walls — a compromise, but what wasn't? He could imagine worse places, worse situations. No problem at all doing that.

He spoke carefully: "I've stopped trying to guess what the director is likely to do."

She smiled faintly beneath her mask and moved beside him. Their shoulders touched every few steps. He shivered with each contact.

"You're building war machines here, aren't you? That's what your robots are."

"Robots aren't weapons."

"But they carry them. I've seen robots patrolling the camp where I was stationed. Not much of a distinction."

"It's enough." He shrugged uncomfortably. "Or it isn't. It doesn't seem to matter here. We're so insulated. There's no connection to anything else. The Chaos can't reach us."

"The director said almost the same thing."

She was looking at him with...he wasn't sure. Sympathy? Horror? The mask made it hard to tell. But he could guess what she was thinking. Everyone had their defenses against the Chaos, their way of dealing with its gradual demolition of the infrastructure. Jacobson hid between white walls.

She stopped walking again, stared out at the infinity at the end of the corridor. She was right, Jacobson thought. They didn't seem to be moving. Like walking in a dream.

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Her voice came from deep inside her. "This place is like my own private hell. I keep thinking I'm dead."

Her robot scooted ahead impatiently, its camera bobbing. She pointed at it: "You don't have one of those horrid little machines following you. Everyone else seems to have one."

Jacobson smiled, a crinkling of his eyes at the edge of his mask. "I designed them. Security knows it couldn't trust anything a robot reported about me."

A few minutes later they were at the door to her dormitory. They cycled through its airlock and into a long, narrow room with beds along one wall. Several women sat in an alcove at the far end, watching a monitor.

Julia took off her mask and sat down on one of the beds. She looked very pale; her red lips contrasted disturbingly with her skin. Unmasking was the most intimate of acts inside. Did she know that?

"Can I get some books?" she asked. "I never could get used to reading off a monitor."

"No books. I'm sorry. Dust."

She nodded, but her dark eyes turned distant and lost.

A rabbit squatted in its sealed cage and looked out with soft, transparent eyes.

"It's ready," Alice said. She held up a vial of clear liquid. "Anti-climactic, really."

They reviewed some details: simulations of a rabbit's immune system interaction with their virus. Reaction kinetics. Nutritional requirements.

"Let's just do it," Jacobson said impatiently.

Alice nodded. "Would you like to perform the injection?"

Jacobson laughed. "I wouldn't have any idea how. All I've ever done is program computers."

Alice shook her head and prepared a syringe.

One of his demons popped onto the lab monitor. Jacobson cursed under his breath. Number 24 — the alarm set to trigger if Julia was ever summoned to see the director. He made some excuse and strode back to his office, furious at the lethargy of the airlocks.

She was still two decontamination stages outward from the director's

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office, being inoculated for something. At the last stage a scowling woman scrubbed her exposed skin until it shone. Finally, she cycled into the small, bare room.

The director stood with his back pressed against the wall. He seemed to be shaking.

"You wanted to see me?" She was frightened, not hiding it well.

"Yes. Yes, I did." He was silent for a moment. "Do you remember how you danced for me, the last time you were here?"

She nodded.

"I enjoyed watching you. I'll admit that. It's unprofessional of me, I suppose...."

Julia said nothing.

"But, you know, I'm in here all day, just these bare walls and a monitor — "

"I thought the walls were your idea."

"Yes, of course. They're *necessary*. But still, the sensory deprivation...can you understand?"

She shook her head. "I don't understand any of this."

He didn't seem to hear her. "Can you help a lonely man with too many responsibilities?"

"How?"

"Dance for me again?"

She stood perfectly still, eyes unfocused. Jacobson found himself holding his breath, digging his fingers into his desktop.

"Do I have to undress?" she asked. Her voice sounded very small against the roar of the recirculators.

"Please."

Jacobson compressed his lips, wanting to cut the session off, unable to make himself do it.

Julia unsealed her coveralls and stepped out of them, then did the same with her underwear. She put her arms out, starting to stretch.

"Your mask too," the director said.

She slipped it slowly over her head. It took her three tries to disengage it.

"Shallow breaths," the director said, stepping to the far corner of the room. "Take shallow breaths."

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She started to move: smooth warm-up poses first, then more disconnected, stylized combinations, tableaux and slashing transitions. She was trying to express something, Jacobson knew that much. Terror? Hopelessness? Anger?

The director stood with his arms held rigidly at his sides. "Stop," he said, after a few minutes.

She slowed, gradually coming to rest in one corner of the room. Perspiration dripped from her forehead, from her neck, from the place between her breasts. It dried quickly in the ceaseless rush of air. She started to shiver.

The director walked toward her. He was shaking visibly now. He stopped a half a meter away, raised one gloved hand and touched her cheek. Julia turned her head; Jacobson couldn't see her face. The director's hand moved down along her neck, paused for a second, traced one breast, then slid down to rest on her hip.

After a few seconds, the director stepped back to the center of the room. "Thank you," he said awkwardly. "You can go now."

Julia picked up her clothes, shivering violently, and stumbled into the airlock.

After eighteen days, most of the rabbit's fur had fallen out. Its flesh had a mottled translucency. It looked like one of the skinned rodents Jacobson remembered seeing in butchers' stalls during the early years of the Chaos.

"It's beautiful," the director said, watching from somewhere. "It's perfect."

Jacobson nodded. "The animal seems healthy enough, even aggressive."

As if in confirmation, the rabbit butted at the glass of its cage with its bullet-shaped head, then bared its teeth in frustration — teeth that shone with the dull glint of stainless steel.

"Maybe we can teach it to use automatic weapons. Save ourselves a lot of trouble with human experiments."

"What?" The director's voice sounded shrill, even for him.

"Never mind." Jacobson just wanted the conversation to end.

"I've never heard you talk like this." The director's tone was smooth again. "Is something the matter?"

Jacobson concentrated on keeping his voice steady. "Yes. I want you to leave Julia Sholokov alone."

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He heard the director breathing for a long moment, then only the hard silence of a severed connection.

"Come with me," Jacobson said. "I'll take you to where we can see the sun."

Julia followed numbly, automatically. They traversed one of the endless corridors, rode up an elevator, then entered a room with a table and several simple chairs. One side of the room had a square window, about a meter wide, triple-paned and heavily sealed along its edges. Julia ran to it and pressed her hands and her mask against the glass. The security robot trundled after her in exaggerated zags, trying for an unobstructed line of sight.

Outside, the sun was indeed visible off to one side, filtered by thin clouds. It hung above a line of brown, rolling hills.

"Is it morning or evening?" she asked.

"Evening."

"Is there a door somewhere? Can we go outside?"

Jacobson shook his head. "We're deep inside here. Nine decontamination stages away from an exit."

She still didn't understand what *inside* meant. Inside was a state of mind. Status in the lab hierarchy grew with inwardness, with the illusion of increasing safety and isolation. Administrators fought for offices on the upstream side of airlocks. Useless decontamination stations were installed to enhance the prestige of those working on their inward sides.

Disappointment registered on her face, darkening its shadows. "Can we stay here for a little while?"

"As long as you like. But you have to talk to me. I'm worried about you."

"Why? Why are you so interested?"

It was a question he'd often asked himself. He still only knew part of the answer:

"You still have the capacity for freedom."

It was something he'd lost, imperceptibly, during his years behind the white walls. "What did you do before you came here?" he asked.

She kept looking out at the sky. "I was a conscript for Associated Municipalities. I cleaned the kitchen in one of their barracks."

"Before that."

She had to make an effort to remember. "I lived with my boyfriend and

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some other people in Cupertino. I was studying dance therapy. I'm not sure why. There really isn't such a thing anymore."

Jacobson pictured her apartment: shelves stuffed with books, pillows on the floor, house plants hanging from hooks. "What government were you with?"

"We were signed up with Mountain View Unaligned, until the district boundary moved. That put us in the skirmish zone, officially, anyway. It didn't really mean much — there was a curfew and we saw patrols sometimes. But Mountain View Unaligned couldn't service us because they're supposed to be neutral — except that they *were* providing power and trash pickup during the sixty days it took for us to transfer to the Santa Clara Free State."

Her voice had become a monotone. Boring, even to her. "One of our neighbors reported us — we were in violation of some neutrality provision of the Articles of Decentralization. That meant both governments had to suspend services. We couldn't even use the street officially. Finally, we had to sign a temporary contract with Associated Municipalities — they serviced the districts on both sides of the skirmish line. That took us out of violation, but then AM suspended everyone's contracts and drafted us."

Jacobson nodded, not quite following all that. It was a pretty typical Chaos story. Everyone he met had one. After a few years, they all began to sound about the same.

"What happened to your boyfriend?"

She shrugged. "He bought into AM's story. They had big plans for him — he's a district administrator or something now. He kept trying to tell me how important he was."

Jacobson nodded again. Municipal employees spent a lot of time convincing themselves of their own significance. It wasn't easy, most often.

"He was pretty much out of the picture by the time I was transferred here. Loss of status to be seen with the kitchen help, I guess."

She turned her back to the window for the first time and leaned against it. The cooling sun touched the hills on the horizon. Her skin turned the color of honey.

"What about you?" she asked.

Jacobson shrugged. "I build robots — mechanical, biological. Whatever we can get contracts for."

He leaned against the window next to her. Despite the stinging showers

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and the disinfectants and the antibiotics, there was still a musky smell to her skin. He wanted to touch her face, follow the curve of her cheek, kiss her sad eyes. But he remembered the director's hand moving over her shivering body, and he kept his distance.

"It's been difficult, since the Chaos," he said. "Robots used to build things. Now they destroy things, mostly." His voice seemed to come from somewhere else, reedy and uncertain. "But I don't know what else to do."

She turned suddenly to face him. "That's what this place does. It destroys whatever you love, it takes it away from you. I used to love to dance. My body used to *need* to do it. Now I feel ill every time I warm up."

She looked straight into his eyes. "When are they going to let me out of here? Nobody will tell me. Nobody but you will talk to me at all."

Jacobson looked away. His mask felt suffocating. He was sure for a moment that something was wrong with it.

"Tell me!" She dug her fingers into his arms.

"I don't know," he said miserably. "I've never heard of anyone leaving. After a while you won't want to. You start thinking about the Chaos...."

"That's what the director said. He told me that my immune system deteriorates in this environment after a while. I'd need intensive medical care if I went back outside — the kind that isn't available to conscripts. I'd probably die in a few months."

She wrapped her arms around herself. "Everything he says sounds so reasonable. But it's all lies, isn't it?"

"I'm not sure. I'm not an expert in immunology...." The director knew everyone's weaknesses.

"How can you work for him?"

He didn't answer for a minute. "He gave me a place to build my robots. He gives me everything I need."

Julia nodded, and Jacobson felt absurdly grateful for her understanding. She moved closer, until their concealed faces were only a few centimeters apart.

"I heard about your rabbit," she said, "how you've turned it into a robot. I'd like to see it."

"You heard *what*?"

"I'm almost invisible here. I hear everything."

It's true, he thought. There weren't any real secrets in the lab. There

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wasn't much point. "I didn't think my work interested you."

"I'd just like to see it." She spoke very clearly, with a slight quiver in her voice.

"All right. We can go down there now if you like. It's an off-shift. The lab should be empty."

Julia walked toward the door with a long last look at the dwindling light.

THE RABBIT paced in deliberate circles around the perimeter of its cage. From time to time the animal glared out at the peering humans. Its skin was perfectly smooth, almost glossy.

"It looks like a bath toy," Julia said.

Jacobson laughed. "I wish I could take so benign a view."

In fact, he didn't know how to see it. There was something shockingly unnatural about the metamorphosed creature. Yet it was unquestionably the greatest achievement of his career.

"It was a normal rabbit before you...?"

"Yes."

"What happened to it?"

"We designed a virus. A simple one. It gradually replaced the animal's skin and muscles with polymer. It replaced the calcium carbonate and phosphate in its bones with stainless steel."

Jacobson walked over to a cabinet, opened a drawer. He took out a clear plastic block that held a tiny skeleton made of perfectly formed steel bones.

"An earlier effort. A mouse. I have dozens of different failures stored away in here. In a way, this one was actually too successful. The virus scavenged all the calcium. There wasn't any left to regulate the hormonal system."

She stared at the delicate metal bones, hypnotized. "How can that...other one live?"

"Its central nervous system is intact, along with the liver and pancreas and bone marrow, and so on. One kind of polymer mimics the action of the actin-myosin fibers that change geometry when the muscles contract—ours curls up into helixes. The polymer is five times as strong as a real muscle. The bones have to be steel or they'd snap in half."

"Won't the metal poison it?"

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He shook his head. "Orthopedic surgeons have been putting stainless steel pins and artificial joints in people for fifty years. The materials are inert. The metal is absorbed a few atoms at a time by the digestive system. Obviously, what we feed these animals is highly enriched in iron and chromium, but it's below toxic levels."

Julia watched the rabbit's calm, measured walk. "Do that for me," she said.

"Do what?"

"Infect me with your virus."

A chill started at the back of his neck. His hands gradually turned numb. "You can't be serious. The effect is *permanent.* I have no idea how long that animal can survive. And the virus won't work with humans. It's tailored to a rabbit's genetics. Your immune system will destroy it before it can even get started."

She pointed at the rabbit, sure of her ground. For all of her innocence, she had lived through fifteen years of the Chaos. "You said that thing is five times stronger than a normal animal. You have to be working on a human version. What other reason could there be for the project?"

Jacobson turned away. "I shouldn't have brought you here. It's crazy. This has nothing to do with you — "

She was on another track, not listening. "You'll need test subjects. Whoever's contracting for this must be planning to provide them. Conscripts — no one would volunteer. Is it Associated Municipalities? It wouldn't surprise me. I'm an AM conscript; you could make it official."

The lab was very quiet. The rush of air all around them obscured real sounds. Racks of equipment threw hard-edged shadows. She gently lifted off his mask, dropped it on the floor, then did the same with her own. She took his face between her hands.

"Look at me, Alex."

Her hands felt cool and soft and calm. He flinched.

"I'll kill myself," she said. "Sooner or later. I can't stay in this place."

Jacobson closed his eyes. Would she? His skin burned where she touched it. She might. *Or worse,* he thought. *She might end up like me.*

"I'll find some way to get you out," he said, talking quickly. "I'll arrange to get you transferred out of Associated Municipalities...."

"Can you really do that?"

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She still held his face. He couldn't move.

"No. Probably not."

The rabbit stopped its pacing and looked up expectantly, sensing something.

"Julia, listen, please. Since I first saw you — before we even met, I've been trying to protect you — "

"Yes or no, Alex?" She blinked away tears. "Before the director invites me to dance again."

He looked into her lovely, open face, nothing hidden, nothing untruthful or hard or cynical. With all the technology at his disposal, he had no other way to defend her from the director's eccentric cruelty, from the white walls. It had come to that. His virus was the only protection he could offer.

He had to try twice before he could force himself to speak. "The process takes months. Years, really. It's probably terribly painful. We really don't know."

She didn't answer.

"I'll be monitoring you. If anything goes wrong, *anything*, I'm giving you the antibody that kills the virus."

She nodded slowly, her thoughts already elsewhere. She watched the rabbit; fellow travelers.

"Alice will have to perform the procedure," he went on. "You'll have to take her into your confidence. Maybe she'll be able to talk you out of it."

Julia's reflection on the glass cage was paler than the rabbit's plastic flesh. "Well my teeth turn to steel too?"

Jacobson nodded dourly. "Yes. It doesn't matter."

"Why not?"

He stepped back, away from the electric contact of her hands. "Because you never smile anyway."

The director strode across his bare white room, legs stiff, hands clasped tightly behind his back, a fine edge of rage driving his step.

The room's floor rose at a slight angle. The ceiling tilted down and the side walls angled inwards. The effect was a subtle distortion of perspective. As long as the director stayed at the back of the room, he looked taller. Obvious, really. Transparent. But Jacobson was certain that no one else noticed.

"Alex, do you have any idea how much power we consume?" The

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question was rhetorical. Jacobson didn't bother to guess.

"Three hundred fifty-one gigawatt-hours every *day.*" Another dozen short, hard strides. "Our internal generating capacity is just under one tenth of that. We'd be able to keep life support going, maybe."

"Is someone threatening to shut down our power?"

"Not precisely. We're on the University phantom grid. Berkeley's reactors transfer the power we need onto the Contra Costa grid, and they transfer it to us. Contra Costa charges a fee of 0.03 in hard currency per kilowatt-hour to cover their life-cycle costs. They're proposing to raise it to *0.60.*"

Jacobson nodded impatiently. This sort of thing was the director's problem. He wasn't sure where he fit in.

"That's a *lot* of hard currency, Alex. More than enough to squeeze out our operating margin long term."

The director always thought long term. It was his most refined skill.

"Who runs the Contra Costa power grid?"

The director stopped walking, faced him. "It's a collective. The principal partners are Faultline Admin and Associated Municipalities."

"Our customers."

"Our customers, yes." He resumed his pacing. "It's odd. They've never challenged us before. Something's changing out there, some balance is shifting. Still, you'd think they would have more sense. We automated their main switching station and most of the outboard ones. We're still networked with that system, I believe?"

Jacobson nodded, finally seeing where the director was headed. "You'd like them to have some technical difficulties?"

"Nothing too catastrophic."

Jacobson always felt awkward in the empty room. He didn't know what to do with his arms. He tried folding them, taking a stand. "I'm reluctant to do that."

"Why?"

"I don't want to see your influence extend outside this building."

The director closed his eyes. He actually seemed to be counting to ten. His reply was convincingly mild. "Either my influence goes out, or the Chaos comes in."

Jacobson felt a blood vessel begin to throb at the side of his head. *Which*

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was worse?

The director still sounded calm, but his body was rigid, stretched tight. "Just send them a message for me, won't you?"

Jacobson sighed. "As you wish. Is there anything else?"

No answer. Jacobson headed for the airlock. He heard the director's acute voice over the squeal of the door.

"Alex."

Jacobson turned around. "Yes?"

"I'm all that stands between us and the Chaos. Remember that. Always remember that."

Then the airlock clicked shut and air rushed in from all sides.

Her skin glistened in the green laser glare. It seemed unnaturally smooth, translucent, supple. She worked tirelessly, hours without resting, dozens of flawless repetitions.

Jacobson waited until Kirkendahl's preoccupied staff drifted out and the lights came back on. Julia remained in position, seated, one leg extended.

"You wore them out," he said.

She came back slowly from wherever she'd been, looked up. "I'm a robot, teaching them how to build robots. I don't suppose that's occurred to anyone."

"Kirkendahl doesn't know what's happening to you. I don't think anyone does. Not yet, anyway."

Julia shook her head. "The blind leading the blind." She stood up, stretched. "You need to do another examination?"

"Yes. At your convenience."

She changed out of her glittering black suit and they walked back to Alice's lab together. Her step seemed different, stiffer, more studied. The polymer was less flexible than skin. Perhaps that made a difference. Or perhaps she was still getting used to her new body.

"The tactile sense seems strange," Julia said.

"Your nerve endings are intact," Jacobson explained. "But they're operating in a different environment. Your brain will adjust, I expect."

She nodded, a little jerkily, then lapsed into thought.

After two months, the transformation of her muscles and flesh was half complete. The bones would take longer, two years or more altogether.

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Everything had gone better than Jacobson could have hoped. She claimed to feel nothing worse than a dull ache in her joints, though her face often seemed to betray symptoms far more intense. He kept expecting her to react with horror to the latest transformation, but the changes only made her more thoughtful. It was Jacobson who grew increasingly horrified.

They stepped through the airlock into the lab, and Julia shook off her haircap. Her head was perfectly smooth.

Jacobson gasped. "Your beautiful black hair..."

She laughed. "It's been falling out for a week now. My head feels so light."

He remembered the first day he saw her, touching the thick, dark braid for reassurance.

"Watch this!" She ran to one wall and took four running steps through the narrow space between lab benches. She cartwheeled, then flew two meters into the air, descending like a diver, back and legs forming one smooth arc. She landed slightly off-center, but recovered quickly.

"I never used to be any good at this." She smiled broadly. "In another few weeks I'll be the finest gymnast in the world."

It doesn't count, Jacobson thought. *You have to be human for it to count.*

"And look." She picked up a steel dewer and squashed it flat with one hand. The flask whistled where its vacuum died. "You know, Alex?" She was suddenly serene, staring out across the benches and glassware and the ultracentrifuges. "I don't think I'll ever be afraid again."

The lights went out.

Machines spun ponderously to a halt. Monitors zagged to black. The howl of the air recirculators faded, leaving a ringing silence. Everyone stopped, paralyzed, listened to their heartbeats, watching retinal ghosts of the white walls.

Ten seconds passed, then ten more. Emergency lights flickered on. Fans whispered, rising in pitch. Jacobson sat by the monitor in his office, waiting for a call from the director. It didn't come for almost half an hour.

"I take it the Contra Costa power grid called your bluff," Jacobson said mildly.

"I can't get the chairman to answer my calls. What did you do?" The director sounded short of breath, chopping off the ends of his words.

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"Nothing special. I dropped the voltage selectively in different neighborhoods. On the geographical display, the brownout spelled out an insult to the chairman's mother."

A moment passed, and the director began making a repetitive, high-pitched sound.

Dear god, Jacobson thought: He's crying.

WITH THE corridors dim and the machines silent, Jacobson was astonished at how empty the lab seemed. Small clusters of junior staff sat in their dormitory rooms watching monitors linked to the outside cameras — cameras that showed crowds of onlookers staring silently at the building. An occasional lone figure strode the hallways. But most of the workspaces and offices felt as if they had been deserted for centuries.

No one had actually left the building — the system assured him of that much — but as he walked restlessly past the labs and the commons rooms, he overheard fragments of a hundred hushed conversations that could concern no other subject. The meals in the cafeteria showed even less variety than usual, prepared largely from imperishables. Had supplies of food been cut off as well? Cloistered in his office, staring at his blank monitor, even Jacobson had to wonder what would happen next.

"How long have you been sitting here in the dark?" Julia asked.

He looked up calmly. For some reason, her sudden appearance hadn't startled him at all. He'd been waiting for her, he realized. Waiting for something.

"Your door was open."

She stood between his desk and the single emergency bulb, unmasked. Her security robot lurked in the indistinct shadows at her feet. Her skin was translucent now, and the light shone through the edge of her silhouette, so that she seemed to be illuminated from within.

"What are your plans?" Jacobson asked, trying to conceal his awe.

"I'm leaving. The process is slowing down; I can tell. I've stopped feeling hungry when I look at a piece of rusty metal or a chrome-plated tool."

"You're leaving?" he asked. He hadn't really heard the rest.

"No one can stop me. I doubt anyone will even try."

"But your bones won't finish changing for months yet — "

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"I know. It isn't important. I'm ready now."

Her voice sounded flat, metallic — the reduced flexibility of her vocal cords? — but her confidence came through clearly enough.

He'd lost her, he realized.

She smiled, the plastic at the corners of her mouth bunching up more than skin would, exaggerating her self-assurance.

"Come with me, Alex."

He shook his head slowly. "After all this time, I don't think I'd know how to leave."

"I'll tell you how." She leaned forward, put her hands on his desk. "*Give yourself the virus.* You know it works now. You know it's safe."

He turned away as if he'd been struck.

"Alex, listen to me. You can't know how it feels — it's like electricity, like fire." Her voice pulled at him, fierce, seductive. "Come with me," she said again. "You and I — we can live *forever.*"

For a lunatic, dislocated moment, he could imagine it: the two of them prowling the edge of the Chaos, spawning a new race. Smooth-skinned, steel-jointed, invincible.

We can live forever.

He squeezed his eyes shut, blocking out the dark room, blocking out his monitor and Julia in her shroud of light. Nothing in his experience had prepared him to be an outlaw. He'd chosen isolation, yes. But another kind — a monastic life, tranquility and order amid the torrent of the Chaos.

Jacobson stood and took both her hands. Her skin felt smooth, fragrant with the bittersweet perfume of hydrocarbons and lubricants. He shook his head.

She disengaged her hands gently. Her security robot whistled a page.

"Julia Sholokov."

She turned toward it, irritated. "What?"

"The director would like to see you."

She spoke very clearly: "Tell him to find someone else."

The robot digested that for a moment. "Follow me, please."

The machine set off toward the door. She ignored it. The robot stopped, reversed direction, and rolled back until it nearly touched the hem of her coveralls.

"Follow me, please." Quite a bit louder this time.

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She stared straight into its camera for a moment. Almost casually, she swung her foot to the robot's midsection. The machine lifted in a silent arc and crashed sideways into the doorframe. It slid to the floor and pitched over onto its back, treads spinning.

Julia stood very straight and still, arms at her sides. She looked down at herself: "What do you think, Alex?"

Jacobson heard a hint of her old vulnerability. It ignited a sudden hot flush of pride in his creation.

"Magnificent," he said. "Nothing less."

She smiled, framed for the last time in the doorway, charged with light.

"I want to see your face," Jacobson said.

The director turned away from the camera, hands knotted behind his back. "What happened to her?" he asked. "She seemed different, just before she left."

Recent events had affected him. He sounded distracted; he nodded his head in small jerks.

"It doesn't matter now," Jacobson said mildly.

"Tell me!"

Jacobson shrugged. "I treated her with my virus. You were...close to her. You must have noticed."

The director seemed paralyzed.

"You don't know much about women, do you?"

The director's voice slid up in pitch again: "Shut up, Jacobson."

"I wondered why you chose her. You've always ignored the other women in the lab. You seemed afraid of them. But Julia had a dancer's body, like a young girl's."

The director strode off the monitor, moving to a corner the camera couldn't reach.

"Come back here," Jacobson said. "I want to see your face."

The thin voice came from far away: "I have to congratulate you, Alex. You've succeeded beyond anyone's expectations. The virus...exquisite! Technology as a catalyst for evolution — "

"Don't change the subject, Blankman."

The sound of the pacing footsteps stopped. "I want your virus, Alex. I want you to infect me."

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"What!"

The director's voice whistled with excitement. "I want to leave the lab. I want to find her."

Jacobson felt something contract deep inside his chest. He pictured the director as a robot, a polymer and steel minotaur emerging from his labyrinth, abroad in the great wide world....

"Show me your face," he said.

Hesitantly, the director moved into view. He put his hands to the side of his head, slowly lifted his helmet. A narrow, pale chin appeared, perfectly smooth. Next, concave cheeks with no hint of color. Finally, frightened blue eyes and a strand of sand-colored hair hanging down over a high forehead. It was the face of a child of twelve or thirteen.

"I never...grew up," the director said quietly. "The stress of the first years of the Chaos. Poor diet. I don't know."

Jacobson nodded, feeling a crushing weariness. The helmet was better. He could hate the helmet. He couldn't hate the face beneath it. "You'll have to come out," he said, "out as far as Alice Freeman's lab."

The director nodded. "When?"

"Meet me there at 06:00."

That was two hours away; time enough to decide what to do.

Jacobson hadn't been so far outside in years. The glass doors of the main entrance were visible through an open airlock and a long corridor. The airlock was meaningless, but he hung back anyway out of force of habit. The airlock station and the front desk were unstaffed. Shabbily dressed civilians wandered along the corridors, staring quietly at the open doors and the white walls.

Jacobson brushed at his sleeves. He stepped back as an old man in faded coveralls shuffled by, trailing particles. With the depletion of hard currency, the fringe staff had left, unwilling to accept central government scrip. But deeper inside, the lab's activities were back to near their normal level. Jacobson appreciated the director's administrative gifts all the more as the responsibilities gradually fell to him.

He walked back down the corridor, inward, tracing Julia's route on her first day. The path seemed less surreal now, merely sterile and dull. He reached Kirkendahl's lab through two open airlocks and another that was still

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in operation. Julia's ghost haunted the room on a dozen monitors; her dismembered limbs still turned and flexed in glowing wireframe green.

He walked through the labyrinth, past empty labs and dormitories, past dark power distribution stations and decontamination facilities. One technician guarded the last airlock. Jacobson nodded to her and cycled through.

The director stood propped against the far wall, his head slumped onto his chest. His flesh was fully transparent in places. Silvery bones and pulsing blood vessels showed through the skin of his face and one of his hands. He was unintentionally fascinating; a sort of museum exhibit.

"The air tastes very stale," the director said. His words came slowly, accompanied by a musical creaking. "I can hardly abide breathing it."

"Your imagination," Jacobson assured him. "The particle count is still below a thousand per cubic foot."

The director shook his head infinitesimally. The effort caused him obvious pain. "Too high. Spores of the Chaos, blowing through the airlocks — like an infection. Leads to internal disorder. Inevitable. You'll see."

Jacobson nodded sadly, wishing that filtration equipment could really stop the Chaos.

"What did you do to me, Alex?"

The question sounded surprisingly clear, as if he'd been granted a final moment of lucidity.

"I inoculated you with one of the earlier strains. The polymer it synthesizes is disordered, brittle. Like glass."

The director's eyes widened. With a shaking, agonized effort he brought one arm up and extended his index finger. Tears welled at the corners of his frozen eyes.

"Why, Alex? We used to be friends."

"I couldn't let you leave. I couldn't let you find Julia."

The director's extended hand curled slowly into a fist. The index finger began to bend, then separated with a singing crack. For a moment, the finger hung suspended in the bellow of the air recirculators. Then it smashed to the floor in a spray of plastic shards and lay glittering in the hard fluorescent glare from the white walls.

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Ray Vukcevich has sold over a dozen short stories to Pulphouse: A Fiction Magazine. *His short fiction has also appeared here and in* Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. *He has taught high school English and journalism, and university and community college computer science. He has also been a bartender, a computer programmer, and a real estate/stock market investor. Now he is a research assistant for the Institute of Cognitive and Decision Sciences at the University of Oregon.*

None of those jobs explains where the inspiration for the wonderfully off-beat "Giant Step" came from.

Giant Step

By Ray Vukcevich

GREGORY FIGURED THE young policeman would hit him tonight, because at some deep level the policeman knew that but for the grace of god and the fact that people still paid taxes for prisons and the personnel to put and keep other people in prisons, he might be homeless and living in a space suit just like Gregory. Just a paycheck away and frightened with pale blue angry eyes and a goofy cowlick, he probably had a pretty young wife who sent him off to work with a kiss and a tuna fish sandwich wrapped in waxed paper, maybe the same waxed paper that blew across the rainbow oil slick in the gutter puddle by Gregory's feet.

In a sudden flash of inspiration, Gregory knew what to say to him. "Well, Officer," he shouted through his helmet, "we can't move along, because all motion is impossible. Zeno proved that thousands of years ago."

Nancy, also suited and sitting on the sidewalk beside Gregory, touched helmets with him. "Is that logic I smell?" Her seven-year-old granddaughter Kim stood behind her. Kim's parents had died years ago in the food riots. Like

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the god of Amos, the government still guaranteed the people clean teeth. Kim hung out with Nancy and didn't talk much these days. She wore a silvery suit sized down for the temporally challenged, and tonight she tapped the side of her helmet with a white plastic spoon and stared up into the sky.

Silver suited figures of all sizes moved in and out of the street shadows, dodging sluggish honking cars and trucks and flickering with neon when they passed under the signs of surviving merchants. The suits had toilet functions, heating and cooling units, rechargeable batteries, water bottles, and air tanks, all the comforts of home. Best of all, supporters of the plan privately claimed, once you sealed a wino up in a space suit, you couldn't smell him. At curfew you could pile the people up like cordwood. But hey, skeptics had cried, surely there can't be enough space suits for what amounts to maybe a third of the population. No problem. We make more suits, put all those guys who lost their jobs when we canceled the space program back to work.

The young policeman squatted down in front of Gregory. He unhooked his big flashlight and shined it in Gregory's face for a few moments. Then he put the flashlight away. Maybe he had more curiosity than most, Gregory thought, maybe if the universities had still been funded, he could have been a passable student. Maybe he wouldn't hit Gregory, after all.

"So what's the story on this Zeno guy, Professor?"

"Yes, tell us, Oh Wise One," Nancy said. "How is it that all motion is impossible?" Nancy was an out-of-work English professor and tended to scoff at all things scientific. She pulled Kim around and down on her lap and wrapped an arm around the child. There weren't many stars to see through the smoggy city lights, but at least one of them captured Kim's attention. She settled back and stared up at the night sky.

"Well, suppose you want to move from here to, say, Mr. Wilson's Store." Gregory pointed at the small grocery occupying the bottom floor of an otherwise gutted building at the end of the block. "To do that surely you'll admit you'd have to go through a point that is halfway between here and there. Say, that big pile of steaming garbage in front of the gun shop. Where the dogs are?"

"Yeah. So?" The policeman said.

"Well, to get to the pile of steaming garbage, Officer, surely you can see you'd first have to go through some point that is halfway between here and the garbage, say that broken fire hydrant."

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"Yeah, okay, first I walk to the fire hydrant, then I walk to the garbage, then I walk to Wilson's store. So what's the problem?"

"But to get to the fire hydrant, you'd have to walk through a point that is halfway between here and the fire hydrant. Right?"

"I suppose."

"But to get to that point, you'd have to walk to a point that's halfway between those two points and to get to that point you'd have to walk to a point that was halfway between those two points and so on and so on."

The policeman didn't look happy, and Gregory thought maybe he'd made a big mistake talking about Zeno. What if paradoxes pissed off the police? Gregory pushed on anyway. What else could he do? Just go silent?

"No matter how small the distance, Officer, you still have to first move through the halfway point. So not only can you not move from here to Mr. Wilson's store, you can't move away from here at all. And that's why we can't move along."

"I think maybe I'll bonk you with my stick, Professor," the policeman said.

"But it wouldn't be a real bonk, would it, Officer?" Nancy asked. She reached out and patted the policeman's knee. Nancy, tough as nails in the old days, a deconstructor of Brontes and cooker of fiery curries, had nonetheless taken instruction from the streets and could now do a respectable grandmother whenever the occasion demanded.

"What do you mean, Nancy?" Gregory sounded nervous and he kept an eye on the policeman's nightstick.

"Well," Nancy said, still smiling at the young policeman, "if motion is impossible, yet we still perceive motion, it must mean that we are deceived. What we see is an illusion. If the officer hits you with his stick, you'll only think it hurts."

"Idealism," Gregory said, making the word sound like another name for utter nonsense.

"Exactly," Nancy said. "And since all material matters are illusions, we can, in fact, move along as this nice young man has suggested we do by simply imagining ourselves elsewhere."

"You are at least half right," Gregory said. "There is a way out of this conundrum. The answer requires no mysticism, however. It's just simple materialism. Imagine we've cut our distance down until it is very very

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small." Gregory took a nail from his utility pouch and scratched a line in the sidewalk.

X_____Y_____Z

"The space between X and Z is the first tiny, tiny distance you must move before you can move on through the rest of the halves and finally get from here to Mr. Wilson's store," Gregory said.

"Seems pretty big to me," the policeman said.

"It's a diagram!" Gregory heard the irritation in his voice and added in a softer tone, "It's blown up."

"Oh," the policeman said. "I suppose you'll say we have to move through Y to get to Z, and you'll start this whole stupid business all over again."

"No," Gregory said. "That's my point. At some very small scale, there is a point where we move from X to Z in one discrete step without going through Y. That's what makes motion possible. We move in tiny little steps. We sort of putt-putt along through, well, hyperspace, for lack of a better word."

"I'm sure glad you got rid of the mysticism, Gregory," Nancy said, "but your putt-putting along will be a little slow for the officer, I think. In my scheme we can move long distances very quickly."

"I don't see why, in principle, we cannot move long distances in my scheme, too," Gregory said. "If you can move a small discrete step without passing through any intermediate points, I don't see why you can't move a large distance in a single step."

"Look out!" Kim cried.

Nancy grabbed his hand, and Gregory looked up in time to see the policeman's nightstick coming down at his face.

Before the stick could crack his faceplate, the policeman disappeared. In fact, the whole street disappeared.

Gregory, Nancy, and Kim popped back into existence overlooking a dry red river valley. The empty red rolling vista went on and on forever. Red sand beneath their boots. Red dust blowing everywhere. Funny looking daytime sky. No bushes. No birds.

"So much room!" Kim stretched out her arms and skipped around in a circle.

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"Where are we?" Nancy shouted through her helmet.

"Mars, I think," Gregory said. "Well, I hope the implosion at least knocked the cop over."

"Maybe you convinced him," Nancy said. "Maybe he's realized that all motion is impossible and he's just sitting there with that silly stick of his. In any case, you can see I was right. Idealism wins the day."

"Materialism," Gregory said. "The evidence is clear."

"You're both wrong," Kim cried. "I did it!"

Gregory grabbed her shoulders and stopped her dancing. He bent over her and touched his faceplate to hers.

Nancy leaned in, helmet to helmet, too. "And just how did you do that, young lady?"

"Yes tell us," Gregory said.

"I wish I may, I wish I might," Kim said.

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Robert Reed's excellent science fiction has become a staple at F&SF. *"The Shape of Everything" takes us into the world of astronomy and beyond.*

Robert writes that he is mentoring gifted students at the local middle school. "All boys, all in science. All different in personality. And none like the plucky geniuses of SF mythology. Gifted, yes, but children — first, last and always." His most recent novel, Beyond the Veil of Stars, *just appeared from Tor Books.*

The Shape of Everything

By Robert Reed

THEY COULDN'T FIND HIM. The party had just become a party, tame scientists finally imbibing enough to act a little careless and speak their minds, every mind happy, even ecstatic. That's when someone noticed that the old man was missing. To bed already? Just when the celebration had begun? But someone else mentioned that he never slept much, and it still was early. And a little knot of technicians went to his cabin and discovered that he wasn't there, precipitating a good deal of worry about his well-being. The next oldest person in the observatory was barely seventy — young enough to be his granddaughter — and almost everyone feared for his health. His strength. Even his mind. Where could he be? they asked themselves. On a night like this...of all nights...?

Search parties began fanning through the facility, and the security net was alerted. Cameras watched for a frail form; terminals waited for his access code. But wherever the man was, he wasn't visible or working. That much was certain after an hour of building panic.

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It was one of his assistants who finally found him. She was a postdoc and maybe his favorite, although he was a difficult man to read in the best of times. What she did was recall something he'd mentioned in passing — something about the cleansing effects of raw light — and she remembered a certain tiny chamber next to the hull, built long ago and never used by the current staff. It had a window to the outside, plus old-style optics, an old-time astronomer able to peer into a simple lensing device, examining the glorious raw light coming straight from the giant mirrors themselves.

She found him drifting, one hand holding him steady, the long frail body looking worn out in the bad light. It looked even worse in good light, she knew. Bones like dried sticks and his flesh hanging loose, spotted with benign moles too numerous to count. The cleansing effects of light? She'd always wondered where a committed night-owl had found time and the opportunity to abuse his skin. More than a century old, and the postdoc felt her customary fear of ending up like him. Lost looks; diminished energies. And she wasn't an authentic genius like him. No residual capacities to lean against, the great long decline taking its toll —

"Yes?" said the astronomer. "What is it?"

She cleared her throat, once and again, then asked, "Are you all right, sir? We were wondering."

"I bet you were," he replied. Only then did he take his eye off the eyepiece, the haggard face grinning at her. "Well, I'm fine. Just got tired of the noise, that's all."

She didn't know how to respond. Leave now? Perhaps she should leave, if he wanted quiet.

But when she turned, he said, "No," with force.

"Sir?"

"Here. Come see this."

As always, she did as she was told. She kicked across the room and used a single eye, knowing the trick but not having done this nonsense in years. Why did anyone bother with lenses? Even when this observatory was built, digitized images were the norm. The best. And besides, what she saw here was just the focused light from a single mirror — a representative sampling of the whole — meaning it was almost useless to their ongoing work. Too simple by a factor of ten million. Yet she wasn't the old man's maybe-favorite for nothing, feigning interest, squinting

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into the little hole until he seemed satisfied.

"It's the same as last time," he said, "and the time before. It's always the same, isn't it?"

She looked at him, nodding and saying, "Why shouldn't it be?"

"But doesn't it amaze you?" He asked the question, then he spoke before she could answer. "But not like it amazes me. Do you know why? Because you grew up expecting to see the beginning of time. When you were a little girl, this place was catching first light with its first mirrors, and by then the goal was obvious. Isn't that right?"

A little nod, and she thought of what was out there. It did amaze her, yes, and what right did he have to minimize her feelings? But it wasn't exactly the beginning of time either. She remembered the digitized images, scrubbed clean by computers, contrasts added and the noise deleted. She could see little blobs of spiraling light — the earliest galaxies — and the best images resolved individual stars. No, it wasn't fair of him to claim a greater amazement. Not when she thought of the work she'd done, the long hours and the years invested in helping him and everyone else, a great mystery now solved, more than likely —

— and the old man was laughing, almost gently.

Was it a trick? A joke? Had he been teasing her? It wouldn't be the first time, of course.

"No, I'm not laughing at you, dear." He smiled, implanted teeth too white to be real. "I'm the amusing one. I look at you and remember someone else. Please, please don't take this wrong, but you've always reminded me of her."

He's been drinking, she realized. At least a little bit.

"A young woman, but she seemed infinitely old at the time. Seventeen years old, give or take, and nearly as beautiful as you. And the first woman I ever loved."

She said nothing.

"Can I tell you about her? Let me, then you'll be free to go back to the party. I promise. It's just a little story, a slice of life tale. I know you don't want to hear it — "

"Not true," she heard herself blurt.

" — but indulge me. For a few moments, please."

Of course. She held the eyepiece in one hand, feeling the residual heat left

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by his hand and knowing she had no choice. This was a duty, perhaps even an honor. Nodding, she looked out the thick window, watching half a dozen mammoth mirrors hanging motionless against the starry background, collecting photons from near the beginning of time...helping to support the theory that he, in part, had formulated....

"I was eight years old at the time."

The woman's imagination strained, picturing him as a boy.

"Forever ago," he said, "or yesterday. Depending on how you count these things."

His parents sent him to a day-camp in the country, and he still could remember waiting for the yellow bus that picked him up at the corner. It was a noisy, stinking bus full of loud kids, and he always sat alone near the front, as close to the driver as possible. The driver was authority, and he believed in authority when he was eight. He thought it was important not to make enemies or get into trouble. A lot of the kids were older and larger, a few of them almost thirteen, and they seemed dangerous. It was the same as school — the same as all life, he imagined — survival depending on being quiet and small, keeping in the shade of authority whenever possible.

His parents meant well. To them, the camp was a peaceful retreat with docile horses, a spring-fed swimming pool and a staff of smiling, well-scrubbed adults. At least the brochures promised as much. The truth was that the horses were ratty and ill-tempered, and the pool's water had a suspicious odor. The staff were teenagers, one particular fellow holding sway over the others. His name was Steve or something equally ordinary — a fellow almost big, lean and strong in a haphazard youthful way. He wore Western clothes, complete with a cowboy hat, and he smoked and chewed tobacco every waking moment. His greatest pleasure in life was bossing around children. It was Steve who introduced the future astronomer to horseback riding and archery, plus a variety of games learned from a stint with that quasi-military organization, the Boy Scouts of America.

One afternoon, on a whim, Steve divided the kids into pairs and said, "This is a tracking game. Shut up and listen." The rules were transparently simple. One person walked from a starting point, heading for the nearby trees, and every time he or she changed direction, two sticks had to be laid down, making an arrowhead to show the new direction. It was a race in time, and

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it shouldn't take long. Steve promised to sit on the porch of the main lodge, drinking beer and keeping track of the minutes. "And when you're done," he promised, "we'll go down to the pool and you can take your daily pees in the deep end. All right? All right!"

The astronomer's partner was maybe a year older, a boy both confident and bold, and he went first, vanishing into the green woods while Steve counted down five minutes. "Go!" He remembered running hard, reaching the woods and cool shadows, then pausing to let his eyes adjust, eventually spotting his partner in a little clearing uphill from him. The boy was kneeling in sunlight, setting a pair of sticks into position. Catching him meant walking a straight line. "That's not fair!" the boy protested. "You've got to follow the arrows!" And as if to prove his hard work and correctness, he took the astronomer back to each arrow, pointing to them with a barely restrained fury.

The other teams took longer. Once done, everyone reassembled, and Steve, using a fancy Boy Scout knife to open a new beer, said, "Five minutes head start. Set. Go!"

"And play fair," warned the astronomer's partner. "Or else!"

Of course he'd play fair. He believed in rules and authority. Yet he had an idea on his run to the woods — a legal possibility — kneeling in the shade and pointing his first arrow in a random direction. Then he started to jog, heading uphill without varying his direction. The rules were being met, after all. The other boys and rare girls were behind him when the five minutes were up. He didn't pause, barely even slowed, and eventually it felt as if he'd gone miles. He was utterly alone, and only then did he kneel and make a second arrow pointing ninety degrees to his first course. It was a big arrow, and the rules were more than satisfied.

Time passed. The angle of the sun changed. After a while he didn't feel sure about any directions, or even his approximate position. Some places looked familiar — perhaps they'd passed here on horseback — but other places resembled virgin forest. What if he couldn't find camp before the bus left? What if he had to spend tonight in the wilderness? Angry with his own cleverness, he turned and pushed straight up a likely hillside, right through the heart of thorny brush and into the open green ground above the lodge, no sight ever so lovely in his long little life.

Walking downhill, he imagined the celebration accompanying his

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return. But instead of relief, he found Steve sitting on a folding chair beside the mossy pool, a swimming suit instead of jeans but the hat and beer in place. Steve's response was to belch, saying, "Look what drug itself in, would you? We were thinking of getting up a search party. But I guess you ruined that fun too. Huh?"

The astronomer's partner was even less understanding. "What happened to you?" he squealed. "You cheated! I knew you'd cheat!"

The lone sympathetic voice came from the life guard's chair. Her name was Wendy. She had a pretty face tanned brown, a nose whitened with cream and big sunglasses hiding her eyes. Wendy was easily the nicest person on the staff, and when he walked past her, she made a point of saying, "I was worried. I thought you might be hurt."

"The kid's fine," Steve shouted. "Don't make a big deal out of it, Wendy, Jesus Christ!"

"And," she said, "I don't think you cheated. I don't."

She looked at Steve while she spoke, her face strong and unperturbed, and he felt there was something between them. He tasted it in the air. There was an understanding, real and precious. She glanced back down at him, the white nose shining. "You are all right, aren't you?"

"I'm fine."

"Good," she said emphatically. "I'm very glad."

MEMORY EXPANDS what's important and what is strange, and that's why his memories of day-camp seemed to cover months, not just a single week. Every day was rich with adventures and horrors, his young body sore every night and his parents curious in a careful way. Was he enjoying himself? They had to hear that their money was well spent. But can a young boy know if he's having a wonderful time? He had never been to camp; he had no basis for comparisons. Maybe it was his fault that he wasn't having great fun. "Oh, I like it," he told them, wanting to please. His parents smiled. Was he making any new friends? He thought of Wendy. Nobody else. But instead he mentioned his partner in the tracking game, which again pleased his audience, Mom and Dad nodding and grinning, congratulating themselves for sending him to that piece of Hell.

It was Thursday when Wendy reminded everyone, "Bring your sleeping

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bags tomorrow, and a change of clothes too." It was a day-camp, but the last day — Friday — reached into Saturday morning. They'd eat dinner here and camp outdoors, then ride home in time for the late morning cartoons.

"We'll sleep up on the hill," Steve told them. "Coyote bait in baggies. It's going to be fun!"

"Quiet," growled Wendy. "Don't say that stuff!"

Steve grinned, stained teeth capable of a menacing air. "They know I'm kidding, girl. They're smart kids. Hell, they love me. Everyone loves me, Wendy. 'Cept you. Ever think why?"

She just shook her head, turning away.

Next morning, at first light, the astronomer woke and found himself hoping to be sick. He looked for a nameless rash, for any excuse not to go. But there were no excuses, him dressing and collecting his belongings, his mother making a snap inspection and then passing him the miraculous sum of five dollars. "For emergencies," she confided. The words seemed full of grim possibilities. No, he wouldn't spend it. He made a pact with himself. There wouldn't be any emergencies, and he'd come home alive and well.

Friday followed the usual routines. There was a horseback ride, his stallion fat and breathing wetly. Steve rode his thundering beast through the trees, trying to spook the others. Like always. Then came the morning archery contest, and the astronomer almost broke one hard rule. He was winning, even beating one of the older boys, and he saved himself unknown horrors by sending his last arrow into the gully behind the range. Steve made him climb after it, but that was okay. He found a fine old bottle hear the arrow, which made it worthwhile. Then came lunch, cold sandwiches and cheap strawberry pop. Then a round of capture-the-flag, followed by a long swim; and somewhere Steve and most of the rest of the staff vanished. No one mentioned where to or why. Wendy sat above the pool, and she seemed uneasy. Or was he imagining things?

By evening, clouds had rolled in. Dinner was hotdogs, boiled and bland. By then Steve and the others had reappeared, laughing and shouting, moving the furniture to one side of the lodge while drinking beer from a big metal keg. There never was any chance to sleep outdoors. By dusk, it was raining, not hard but enough, and Steve told the kids to spread their bags in a corner and keep out of trouble. He already was drunk, though it would be years before the astronomer would appreciate what kind of fellow Steve was. Possessing

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an alcoholic's constitution, his nervous system could function despite being thoroughly pickled. Kids and nondrinkers stayed clear of him. Particularly Wendy. Meanwhile others arrived from somewhere. They were teenagers, big and loud, and maybe there weren't many of them. Maybe they weren't even badly behaved. But to an eight-year-old from a tame, sober household, it seemed as if there were thousands of them packed into the lodge. A hi-fi played stacks of records. People danced while others drank beer and smoked, sometimes pointing to the kids huddled in their corner, making jokes and breaking into raucous laughter.

Steve would watch Wendy, sometimes cocking his cowboy hat and making his approach. But she'd spot him and shy away somehow. She'd vanish into the bathroom or around to the other side of the room, Steve becoming puzzled, walking circles and finally spotting his love all over again.

It was a great drama — a drama that must have been played out through the summer — and it had rhythms and its rules. Wendy usually placed herself near the kids, perhaps feeling protective of them. And Steve's approaches became bolder, failure having a cumulative effect on his frustration. It became late, probably not even midnight but that was very late back then; and the party was running without pause, without even needing to breathe. "Which," confessed the astronomer, "might be where I learned to dislike parties." Then he smiled at the postdoc, pausing, nodding to himself and the eyes losing their focus.

The postdoc wondered if the story was finished. Was that all there was to it?

Seemingly changing the subject, he told her, "We've done astonishing work here. You know, you deserve to feel proud."

"I do," she promised.

He drifted closer, and for an instant she feared he would make a clumsy romantic pass. But no, all he wanted was to peer through the eyepiece again. He squinted, watching galaxies forming in the first billion years after Creation. It was then that the universe had cooled enough and diluted itself enough to allow suns to form. But why like this? Why make galaxies of that particular size and composition? It had been a mystery for decades. Why did these oldest galaxies have a sameness of size and color? And what mechanism caused them to be arranged in enormous groups, forming distinct wall-like

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structures stretching for hundreds of millions of light-years?

Now they knew, or at least they thought they did.

The best clues had remained hidden. It had taken every mirror and every interlinked computer to bring them out. Black holes and cosmic strings were just part of the explanation. More important were some dim dense plasma clouds — relics of a hotter, older era — and how each cloud was aligned beside one new spiral galaxy. Cosmic strings ran through both of them, making eddies in the primordial gases which in turn made suns. Just five years ago, researchers had determined that those earliest suns were divided into distinct sizes and colors. They came in twenty-three flavors, in essence. They ranged from orange pinpricks to blue-white giants, and what was stranger was their orderly spacing. Very odd, they seemed. Unlikely. Bizarre.

It was the old man's suggestions that had made the difference. He hadn't done the hard work — he wouldn't have known how, the youngsters much more skilled with computer simulations and high-energy physics — but he was the crazy one who suggested they were looking at the work of ancient, possibly extinct intelligences. What if the plasma clouds were organized? What if they were truly conscious? They manipulated matter and the superstrings to create the first galaxies, arranging them in space in order to fulfill a great purpose. "Just suppose," he had told everyone. "That's all I want. Just suppose."

Even the postdoc, loyal by any measure, had to wonder if the old man was losing his mind and common sense. "Why would they build galaxies?" she had asked him. "What possible role could they serve?"

But he'd had an answer waiting. "Distinct kinds of stars might imply some kind of alphabet. A code. Maybe a coherent language. The giant black holes at the center can act as anchors or reference points. Look at the galaxy from above, and you can read everything at a glance."

"Can plasmas be alive?" she had inquired.

"Perhaps. In a smaller, hotter universe, perhaps they'd evolved into intelligence. Maybe galaxies were used as elaborate transmitting devices."

"Transmitting what? And to whom?"

"I don't know, but I can guess." A long pause. "What audience? I don't think the plasmas were chatting with each other. Look at the background temperatures then. Space must have been very, very cold already. From their perspective, I mean. Building galaxies was something done just before they

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dissolved. Before they died. It was the end of their time, and I think their intended audience hadn't even been born yet."

It was a crazy notion, and a great one, and a few people found the craziness appealing. They did some tests, made mathematical models, and found that indeed, each galaxy had its own inherent code. The best images were just good enough to read a kind of dictionary encircling the central black holes. It was stunning news, and the first translations had answered most of the central questions. Those plasma clouds, using cosmic strings as their pens, were visible writing their autobiographies. In effect, they were telling of their births and development, sentience evolving from the heat and hard radiations. Evolving and growing aware enough to recognize a doomed future. Billions of stars constituted life stories, their authors like old men and women huddling about a waning fire, jotting down a few last notes before their great sleep.

Die they did. Nearer, younger space showed no plasmas, but the galaxies persisted for a little while. Patient observers could resurrect old meanings, if they wished. But eventually the original stars aged and exploded, helping to form wild suns while spewing out carbon and oxygen and iron. And meanwhile, the central black holes swallowed anything close, the first quasars igniting, and human beings spotting those scalding lights back when this old man was a mere eight-year-old waif, attending summer camp, wholly unaware that he was the audience whom the great clouds had anticipated.

He was the new ruler of the universe....

The postdoc thought of leaving, glancing at the door, wondering if she should tell the others that he was found. Found and a little drunk and babbling.

"Actually," he said, "you don't remind me of Wendy. I barely remember the girl, quite frankly."

With honesty and a certain impatience, she asked, "I don't understand. Why are you telling me this story now?"

"Because it's pleasant. Because it's important." He sighed and said, "Because I want to tell it."

She nodded and waited.

"Steve eventually caught Wendy, and by then he was titanically drunk. And I'd guess, dangerous too. In my mind he seemed awfully dangerous."

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She knew those kinds of men. Too many of them, in fact.

"As it happened, she was near me when she was caught, and he shouted, 'Aren't you going to dance with me?' Poor Wendy. She had a look on her face, brave and scared at the same time. Then she made herself smile, telling him, 'I promised my friend this dance.' With that she snatched me off my sleeping bag and took me into the middle of the room, a new song beginning. I can't remember the song, but I remember dancing and how I looked at the hi-fi as we passed. Each time I looked, measuring how much time remained. There is a certain similarity between these galaxies and our old-fashioned records, and maybe that's the point of my story." A long pause, then he said, "If anyone asks, tell them that I had my inspiration while remembering an out-of-date technology. The hi-fi."

She gave a nod, thinking he was done.

But he said, "Later we went outside together. Wendy led me outdoors." A sigh and a smile. "The lodge's roof overhung a patch of dry ground, and we sat together and talked. I don't remember about what. Though I think she told me, 'We're okay if you stay with me. Steve's gutless, and good people like you scare him."

The postdoc said, "I see...."

"No, I haven't thought about Wendy in a long time," he admitted. "It's the atmosphere tonight. It's the meanings of stars." He smiled at her with his too-white teeth. "I'm glad you're the one who found me. And just you."

She felt honored and uncomfortable.

"Everyone's so happy tonight, and why?" He told her, "It's because a great race from the dawn of time was dying. Dying and feeling the urge to leave some memory of themselves. And we're the clever ones who are going to be lionized for seeing what's obvious."

She gave a little nod.

"For all we know, the Milky Way itself began as someone's autobiography. We're built on the scrambled, incoherent epic of something vast. And when our time passes, when every sun burns out, perhaps we'll leave some similar kind of record for those who follow us."

The postdoc cleared her throat, then asked, "What happened to Wendy?"

A smile grew on the weary face. "Later, much later, a friend of hers came outside and told her that Steve was asleep. Unconscious. She was safe again, and she turned to me, saying, 'Thank you for your help.' Then she gave me

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a little kiss on the forehead — my first kiss outside my ugly old family — and she walked with me back inside.

"I remember my heart.

"I remember feeling its beat, and how I held Wendy's hand with both of mine, wishing I didn't have to let go. Wishing time would stop itself and save this moment. I kept wishing I was special enough to make time stop. And that's when I learned that I wasn't so special, and everything is eventually lost, making room for everything else. And that's not too sad. If you think about it. There's always room being made for the future, and that's altogether not a bad thing." ☙

Hi, I'm you, calling from your future with important information that could save — click-click
Hold on, Bob, I've got another call from MY future...
CALL-FROM-THE-FUTURE WAITING

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At a convention a number of years ago, Mike Resnick told me he planned to write a novella that would be perfect for F&SF. *It would be science fiction, he said, and I would like it. He just had to finish a few other projects first. When the novella landed on my desk several months ago, I realized that Mike was right on two of the three counts. Science fiction, perfect for* F&SF, *but I didn't just like it. I loved it.*

"Seven Views of Olduvai Gorge" provided the inspiration for Jill Bauman's cover. When you finish reading the novella, and want to find more Resnick, check out the three books he currently has on the stands: Inferno, Profit, *and* A Miracle of Rare Design.

Seven Views of Olduvai Gorge

By Mike Resnick

THE CREATURES CAME again last night.

The moon had just slipped behind the clouds when we heard the first rustlings in the grass. Then there was a moment of utter silence, as if they knew we were listening for them, and finally there were the familiar hoots and shrieks as they raced to within fifty meters of us and, still screeching, struck postures of aggression.

They fascinate me, for they never show themselves in the daylight, and yet they manifest none of the features of the true nocturnal animal. Their eyes are not oversized, their ears cannot move independently, they tread very heavily on their feet. They frighten most of the other members of my party, and while I am curious about them, I have yet to absorb one of them and study it.

To tell the truth, I think my use of absorption terrifies my companions more than the creatures do, though there is no reason why it should. Although I am relatively young by my race's standards, I am nevertheless

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many millennia older than any other member of my party. You would think, given their backgrounds, that they would know that any trait someone of my age possesses must by definition be a survival trait.

Still, it bothers them. Indeed, it *mystifies* them, much as my memory does. Of course, theirs seem very inefficient to me. Imagine having to learn everything one knows in a single lifetime, to be totally ignorant at the moment of birth! Far better to split off from your parent with his knowledge intact in your brain, just as *my* parent's knowledge came to him, and ultimately to me.

But then, that is why we are here: not to compare similarities, but to study differences. And never was there a race so different from all his fellows as Man. He was extinct barely seventeen millennia after he strode boldly out into the galaxy from this, the planet of his birth — but during that brief interval he wrote a chapter in galactic history that will last forever. He claimed the stars for his own, colonized a million worlds, ruled his empire with an iron will. He gave no quarter during his primacy, and he asked for none during his decline and fall. Even now, some forty-eight centuries after his extinction, his accomplishments and his failures still excite the imagination.

Which is why we are on Earth, at the very spot that was said to be Man's true birthplace, the rocky gorge where he first crossed over the evolutionary barrier, saw the stars with fresh eyes, and vowed that they would someday be his.

Our leader is Bellidore, an Elder of the Kragan people, orange-skinned, golden fleeced, with wise, patient ways. Bellidore is well-versed in the behavior of sentient beings, and settles our disputes before we even know that we are engaged in them.

Then there are the Stardust Twins, glittering silver beings who answer to each other's names and finish each other's thoughts. They have worked on seventeen archaeological digs, but even *they* were surprised when Bellidore chose them for this most prestigious of all missions. They behave like life mates, though they display no sexual characteristics — but like all the others, they refuse to have physical contact with me, so I cannot assuage my curiosity.

Also in our party is the Moriteu, who eats the dirt as if it were a delicacy, speaks to no one, and sleeps upside-down while hanging from a branch of a

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nearby tree. For some reason, the creatures always leave it alone. Perhaps they think it is dead, possibly they know it is asleep and that only the rays of the sun can awaken it. Whatever the reason, we would be lost without it, for only the delicate tendrils that extend from its mouth can excavate the ancient artifacts we have discovered with the proper care.

We have four other species with us: one is an Historian, one an Exobiologist, one an Appraiser of human artifacts, and one a Mystic. (At least, I *assume* she is a Mystic, for I can find no pattern to her approach, but this may be due to my own shortsightedness. After all, what I do seems like magic to my companions and yet it is a rigorously-applied science.)

And, finally, there is me. I have no name, for my people do not use names, but for the convenience of the party I have taken the name of He Who Views for the duration of the expedition. This is a double misnomer: I am not a *he*, for my race is not divided by gender; and I am not a viewer, but a Fourth Level Feeler. Still, I could intuit very early in the voyage that "feel" means something very different to my companions than to myself, and out of respect for their sensitivities, I chose a less accurate name.

Every day finds us back at work, examining the various strata. There are many signs that the area once teemed with living things, that early on there was a veritable explosion of life forms in this place, but very little remains today. There are a few species of insects and birds, some small rodents, and of course the creatures who visit our camp nightly.

Our collection has been growing slowly. It is fascinating to watch my companions perform their tasks, for in many ways they are as much of a mystery to me as my methods are to them. For example, our Exobiologist needs only to glide her tentacle across an object to tell us whether it was once living matter; the Historian, surrounded by its complex equipment, can date any object, carbon-based or otherwise, to within a decade of its origin, regardless of its state of preservation; and even the Moriteu is a thing of beauty and fascination as it gently separates the artifacts from the strata where they have rested for so long.

I am very glad I was chosen to come on this mission.

We have been here for two lunar cycles now, and the work goes slowly. The lower strata were thoroughly excavated eons ago (I have such a personal interest in learning about Man that I almost used the word *plundered* rather

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than *excavated*, so resentful am I at not finding more artifacts), and for reasons as yet unknown there is almost nothing in the more recent strata.

Most of us are pleased with our results, and Bellidore is particularly elated. He says that finding five nearly intact artifacts makes the expedition an unqualified success.

All the others have worked tirelessly since our arrival. Now it is almost time for me to perform my special function, and I am very excited. I know that my findings will be no more important that the others', but perhaps, when we put them all together, we can finally begin to understand what it was that made Man what he was.

"Are you..." asked the first Stardust Twin.

"...ready?" said the second.

I answered that I was ready, that indeed I had been anxious for this moment.

"May we..."

"...observe?" they asked.

"If you do not find it distasteful," I replied.

"We are...

"...scientists," they said. "There is..."

"...very little..."

"...that we cannot view..."

"...objectively."

I ambulated to the table upon which the artifact rested. It was a stone, or at least that is what it appeared to be to my exterior sensory organs. It was triangular, and the edges showed signs of work.

"How old is this?" I asked.

"Three million..."

"...five hundred and sixty-one thousand..."

"...eight hundred and twelve years," answered the Stardust Twins.

"I see," I said.

"It is much..."

"...the oldest..."

"...of our finds."

I stared at it for a long time, preparing myself. Then I slowly, carefully, altered my structure and allowed my body to flow over and around the stone,

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engulfing it, and assimilating its history. I began to feel a delicious warmth as it became one with me, and while all my exterior senses had shut down, I knew that I was undulating and glowing with the thrill of discovery. I became one with the stone, and in that corner of my mind that is set aside for Feeling, I seemed to sense the Earth's moon looming low and ominous just above the horizon...

* * *

ENKATAI AWOKE with a start just after dawn and looked up at the moon, which was still high in the sky. After all these weeks it still seemed far too large to hang suspended in the sky, and must surely crash down onto the planet any moment. The nightmare was still strong in her mind, and she tried to imagine the comforting sight of five small, unthreatening moons leapfrogging across the silver sky of her own world. She was able to hold the vision in her mind's eye for only a moment, and then it was lost, replaced by the reality of the huge satellite above her.

Her companion approached her.

"Another dream?" he asked.

"Exactly like the last one," she said uncomfortably. "The moon is visible in the daylight, and then we begin walking down the path..."

He stared at her with sympathy and offered her nourishment. She accepted it gratefully, and looked off across the veldt.

"Just two more days," she sighed, "and then we can leave this awful place."

"It is not such a terrible world," replied Bokatu. "It has many good qualities."

"We have wasted our time here," she said. "It is not fit for colonization."

"No, it is not," he agreed. "Our crops cannot thrive in this soil, and we have problems with the water. But we have learned many things, things that will eventually help us choose the proper world."

"We learned most of them the first week we were here," said Enkatai. "The rest of the time was wasted."

"The ship had other worlds to explore. They could not know we would be able to eliminate this one in such a short time."

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She shivered in the cool morning air. "I hate this place."

"It will someday be a fine world," said Bokatu. "It awaits only the evolution of the brown monkeys."

Even as he spoke, an enormous baboon, some 350 pounds in weight, heavily muscled, with a shaggy chest and bold, curious eyes, appeared in the distance. Even walking on all fours it was a formidable figure, fully twice as large as the great spotted cats.

"*We* cannot use this world," continued Bokatu, "but someday *his* descendants will spread across it."

"They seem so placid," commented Enkatai.

"They *are* placid," agreed Bokatu, hurling a piece of food at the baboon, which raced forward and picked it up off the ground. It sniffed at it, seemed to consider whether or not to taste it, and finally, after a moment of indecision, put it in its mouth. "But they will dominate this planet. The huge grass-eaters spend too much time feeding, and the predators sleep all the time. No, my choice is the brown monkey. They are fine, strong, intelligent animals. They have already developed thumbs, they possess a strong sense of community, and even the great cats think twice about attacking them. They are virtually without natural predators." He nodded his head, agreeing with himself. "Yes, it is they who will dominate this world in the eons to come."

"No predators?" said Enkatai.

"Oh, I suppose one falls prey to the great cats now and then, but even the cats do not attack when they are with their troop." He looked at the baboon. "That fellow has the strength to tear all but the biggest cat to pieces."

"Then how do you account for what we found at the bottom of the gorge?" she persisted.

"Their size has cost them some degree of agility. It is only natural that one occasionally falls down the slopes to its death."

"Occasionally?" she repeated. "I found seven skulls, each shattered as if from a blow."

"The force of the fall," said Bokatu with a shrug. "Surely you don't think the great cats brained them before killing them?"

"I wasn't thinking of the cats," she replied.

"What, then?"

"The small, tailless monkeys that live in the gorge."

Bokatu allowed himself the luxury of a superior smile. "Have you *looked*

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at them?" he said. "They are scarcely a quarter the size of the brown monkeys."

"I *have* looked at them," answered Enkatai. "And they, too, have thumbs."

"Thumbs alone are not enough," said Bokatu.

"They live in the shadow of the brown monkeys, and they are still here," she said. "*That* is enough."

"The brown monkeys are eaters of fruits and leaves. Why should they bother the tailless monkeys?"

"They do more than not bother them," said Enkatai. "They avoid them. That hardly seems like a species that will someday spread across the world."

Bokatu shook his head. "The tailless monkeys seem to be at an evolutionary dead end. Too small to hunt game, too large to feed themselves on what they can find in the gorge, too weak to compete with the brown monkeys for better territory. My guess is that they're an earlier, more primitive species, destined for extinction."

"Perhaps," said Enkatai.

"You disagree?"

"There is something about them..."

"What?"

Enkatai shrugged. "I do not know. They make me uneasy. It is something in their eyes, I think — a hint of malevolence."

"You are imagining things," said Bokatu.

"Perhaps," replied Enkatai again.

"I have reports to write today," said Bokatu. "But tomorrow I will prove it to you."

The next morning Bokatu was up with the sun. He prepared their first meal of the day while Enkatai completed her prayers, then performed his own while she ate.

"Now," he announced, "we will go down into the gorge and capture one of the tailless monkeys."

"Why?"

"To show you how easy it is. I may take it back with me as a pet. Or perhaps we shall sacrifice it in the lab and learn more about its life processes."

"I do not *want* a pet, and we are not authorized to kill any animals."

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"As you wish," said Bokatu. "We will let it go."

"Then why capture one to begin with?"

"To show you that they are not intelligent, for if they are as bright as you think, I will not be able to capture one." He pulled her to an upright position. "Let us begin."

"This is foolish," she protested. "The ship arrives in midafternoon. Why don't we just wait for it?"

"We will be back in time," he replied confidently. "How long can it take?"

She looked at the clear blue sky, as if trying to urge the ship to appear. The moon was hanging, huge and white, just above the horizon. Finally she turned to him.

"All right, I will come with you — but only if you promise merely to observe them, and not to try to capture one."

"Then you admit I'm right?"

"Saying that you are right or wrong has nothing to do with the truth of the situation. I *hope* you are right, for the tailless monkeys frighten me. But I do not know you are right, and neither do you."

Bokatu stared at her for a long moment.

"I agree," he said at last.

"You agree that you cannot know?"

"I agree not to capture one," he said. "Let us proceed."

They walked to the edge of the gorge and then began climbing down the steep embankments, steadying themselves by wrapping their limbs around trees and other outgrowths. Suddenly they heard a loud screeching.

"What is that?" asked Bokatu.

"They have seen us," replied Enkatai.

"What makes you think so?"

"I have heard that scream in my dream — and always the moon was just as it appears now."

"Strange," mused Bokatu. "I have heard them many times before, but somehow they seem louder this time."

"Perhaps more of them are here."

"Or perhaps they are more frightened," he said. He glanced above him. "Here is the reason," he said, pointing. "We have company."

She looked up and saw a huge baboon, quite the largest she had yet seen,

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following them at a distance of perhaps fifty feet. When its eyes met hers it growled and looked away, but made no attempt to move any closer or farther away.

They kept climbing, and whenever they stopped to rest, there was the baboon, its accustomed fifty feet away from them.

"Does *he* look afraid to you?" asked Bokatu. "If these puny little creatures could harm him, would he be following us down into the gorge?"

"There is a thin line between courage and foolishness, and an even thinner line between confidence and over-confidence," replied Enkatai.

"If he is to die here, it will be like all the others," said Bokatu. "He will lose his footing and fall to his death."

"You do not find it unusual that every one of them fell on its head?" she asked mildly.

"They broke every bone in their bodies," he replied. "I don't know why you consider only the heads."

"Because you do not get identical head wounds from different incidents."

"You have an overactive imagination," said Bokatu. He pointed to a small hairy figure that was staring up at them. "Does *that* look like something that could kill our friend here?"

The baboon glared down into the gorge and snarled. The tailless monkey looked up with no show of fear or even interest. Finally it shuffled off into the thick bush.

"You see?" said Bokatu smugly. "One look at the brown monkey and it retreats out of sight."

"It didn't seem frightened to me," noted Enkatai.

"All the more reason to doubt its intelligence."

In another few minutes they reached the spot where the tailless monkey had been. They paused to regain their strength, and then continued to the floor of the gorge.

"Nothing," announced Bokatu, looking around. "My guess is that the one we saw was a sentry, and by now the whole tribe is miles away."

"Observe our companion."

The baboon had reached the floor of the gorge and was tensely testing the wind.

"He hasn't crossed over the evolutionary barrier yet," said Bokatu,

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amused. "Do you expect him to search for predators with a sensor?"

"No," said Enkatai, watching the baboon. "But if there is no danger, I expect him to relax, and he hasn't done that yet."

"That's probably how he lived long enough to grow this large," said Bokatu, dismissing her remarks. He looked around. "What could they possibly find to eat here?"

"I don't know."

"Perhaps we should capture one and dissect it. The contents of its stomach might tell us a lot about it."

"You promised."

"It would be so simple, though," he persisted. "All we'd have to do would be bait a trap with fruits or nuts."

Suddenly the baboon snarled, and Bokatu and Enkatai turned to locate the source of his anger. There was nothing there, but the baboon became more and more frenzied. Finally it raced back up the gorge.

"What was that all about, I wonder?" mused Bokatu.

"I think we should leave."

"We have half a day before the ship returns."

"I am uneasy here. I walked down a path exactly like this in my dream."

"You are not used to the sunlight," he said. "We will rest inside a cave."

She reluctantly allowed him to lead her to a small cave in the wall of the gorge. Suddenly she stopped and would go no further.

"What is the matter?"

"This cave was in my dream," she said. "Do not go into it."

"You must learn not to let dreams rule your life," said Bokatu. He sniffed the air. "Something smells strange."

"Let us go back. We want nothing to do with this place."

He stuck his head into the cave. "New world, new odors."

"Please, Bokatu!"

"Let me just see what causes that odor," he said, shining his light into the cave. It illuminated a huge pile of bodies, many of them half-eaten, most in various states of decomposition.

"What are they?" he asked, stepping closer.

"Brown monkeys," she replied without looking. "Each with its head

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staved in."

"This was part of your dream, too?" he asked, suddenly nervous.

She nodded her head. "We must leave this place *now*!"

He walked to the mouth of the cave.

"It seems safe," he announced.

"It is never safe in my dream," she said uneasily. They left the cave and walked about fifty yards when they came to a bend in the floor of the gorge. As they followed it, they found themselves facing a tailless monkey.

"One of them seems to have stayed behind," said Bokatu. "I'll frighten him away." He picked up a rock and threw it at the monkey, which ducked but held its ground.

Enkatai touched him urgently on the shoulder. "More than one," she said.

He looked up. Two more tailless monkeys were in a tree almost directly overhead. As he stepped aside, he saw four more lumbering toward them out of the bush. Another emerged from a cave, and three more dropped out of nearby trees.

"What have they got in their hands?" he asked nervously.

"You would call them the femur bones of grass-eaters," said Enkatai, with a sick feeling in her thorax. "*They* would call them weapons."

The hairless monkeys spread out in a semi-circle, then began approaching them slowly.

"But they're so *puny*!" said Bokatu, backing up until he came to a wall of rock and could go no farther.

"You are a fool," said Enkatai, helplessly trapped in the reality of her dream. "*This* is the race that will dominate this planet. Look into their eyes!"

Bokatu looked, and he saw things, terrifying things, that he had never seen in any being or any animal before. He barely had time to offer a brief prayer for some disaster to befall this race before it could reach the stars, and then a tailless monkey hurled a smooth, polished, triangular stone at his head. It dazed him, and as he fell to the ground, the clubs began pounding down rhythmically on him and Enkatai.

At the top of the gorge, the baboon watched the carnage until it was over, and then raced off toward the vast savannah, where he would be safe,

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at least temporarily, from the tailless monkeys.

* * *

"A weapon," I mused. "It was a *weapon*!"

I was all alone. Sometime during the Feeling, the Stardust Twins had decided that I was one of the few things they could not be objective about, and had returned to their quarters.

I waited until the excitement of discovery had diminished enough for me to control my physical structure. Then I once again took the shape that I presented to my companions, and reported my findings to Bellidore.

"So even then they were aggressors," he said. "Well, it is not surprising. The will to dominate the stars had to have come from somewhere."

"It is surprising that there is no record of any race having landed here in their prehistory," said the Historian.

"It was a survey team, and Earth was of no use to them," I answered. "They doubtless touched down on any number of planets. If there is a record anywhere, it is probably in their archives, stating that Earth showed no promise as a colony world."

"But didn't they wonder what had happened to their team?" asked Bellidore.

"There were many large carnivores in the vicinity," I said. "They probably assumed the team had fallen prey to them. Especially if they searched the area and found nothing."

"Interesting," said Bellidore. "That the weaker of the species should have risen to dominance."

"I think it is easily explained," said the Historian. "*As* the smaller species, they were neither as fast as their prey nor as strong as their predators, so the creation of weapons was perhaps the only way to avoid extinction...or at least the best way."

"Certainly they displayed the cunning of the predator during their millennia abroad in the galaxy," said Bellidore.

"One does not *stop* being aggressive simply because one invents a weapon," said the Historian. "In fact, it may *add* to one's aggression."

"I shall have to consider that," said Bellidore, looking somewhat unconvinced.

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"I have perhaps over-simplified my train of thought for the sake of this discussion," replied the Historian. "Rest assured that I will build a lengthy and rigorous argument when I present my findings to the Academy."

"And what of you, He Who Views?" asked Bellidore. "Have you any observations to add to what you have told us?"

"It is difficult to think of a rock as being the precursor of the sonic rifle and the molecular imploder," I said thoughtfully, "but I believe it to be the case."

"A most interesting species," said Bellidore.

It took almost four hours for my strength to return, for Feeling saps the energy like no other function, drawing equally from the body, the emotions, the mind, and the empathic powers.

The Moriteu, its work done for the day, was hanging upside-down from a tree limb, lost in its evening trance, and the Stardust Twins had not made an appearance since I had Felt the stone.

The other party members were busy with their own pursuits, and it seemed an ideal time for me to Feel the next object, which the Historian told me was approximately 23,300 years old.

It was the metal blade of a spear, rusted and pitted, and before I assimilated it, I thought I could see a slight discoloration, perhaps caused by blood...

* * *

HIS NAME was Mtepwa, and it seemed to him that he had been wearing a metal collar around his neck since the day he had been born. He knew that couldn't be true, for he had fleeting memories of playing with his brothers and sisters, and of stalking the kudu and the bongo on the tree-covered mountain where he grew up.

But the more he concentrated on those memories, the more vague and imprecise they became, and he knew they must have occurred a very long time ago. Sometimes he tried to remember the name of his tribe, but it was lost in the mists of time, as were the names of his parents and siblings.

It was at times like this that Mtepwa felt sorry for himself, but then he would consider his companions' situation, and he felt better, for while they

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were to be taken in ships and sent to the edge of the world to spend the remainder of their lives as slaves of the Arabs and the Europeans, he himself was the favored servant of his master, Sharif Abdullah, and as such his position was assured.

This was his eighth caravan — or was it his ninth? — from the Interior. They would trade salt and cartridges to the tribal chiefs who would in turn sell them their least productive warriors and women as slaves, and then they would march them out, around the huge lake and across the dry flat savannah. They would circle the mountain that was so old that it had turned white on the top, just like a white-haired old man, and finally out to the coast, where dhows filled the harbor. There they would sell their human booty to the highest bidders, and Sharif Abdullah would purchase another wife and turn half the money over to his aged, feeble father, and they would be off to the Interior again on another quest for black gold.

Abdullah was a good master. He rarely drank — and when he did, he always apologized to Allah at the next opportunity — and he did not beat Mtepwa overly much, and they always had enough to eat, even when the cargo went hungry. He even went so far as to teach Mtepwa how to read, although the only reading matter he carried with him was the Koran.

Mtepwa spent long hours honing his reading skills with the Koran, and somewhere along the way he made a most interesting discovery: the Koran forbade a practitioner of the True Faith to keep another member in bondage.

It was at that moment that Mtepwa made up his mind to convert to Islam. He began questioning Sharif Abdullah incessantly on the finer points of his religion, and made sure that the old man saw him sitting by the fire, hour after hour, reading the Koran.

So enthused was Sharif Abdullah at this development that he frequently invited Mtepwa into his tent at suppertime, and lectured him on the subtleties of the Koran far into the night. Mtepwa was a motivated student, and Sharif Abdullah marveled at his enthusiasm.

Night after night, as lions prowled around their camp in the Serengeti, master and pupil studied the Koran together. And finally the day came when Sharif Abdullah could no longer deny that Mtepwa was indeed a true believer of Islam. It happened as they camped at the Olduvai Gorge, and that very day Sharif Abdullah had his smith remove the collar from Mtepwa's neck, and Mtepwa himself destroyed the chains link by link, hurling them deep into the

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gorge when he was finished.

Mtepwa was now a free man, but knowledgeable in only two areas: the Koran, and slave-trading. So it was only natural that when he looked around for some means to support himself, he settled upon following in Sharif Abdullah's footsteps. He became a junior partner to the old man, and after two more trips to the Interior, he decided that he was ready to go out on his own.

To do that, he required a trained staff—warriors, smiths, cooks, trackers—and the prospect of assembling one from scratch was daunting, so, since his faith was less strong than his mentor's, he simply sneaked into Sharif Abdullah's quarters on the coast one night and slit the old man's throat.

The next day, he marched inland at the head of his own caravan.

He had learned much about the business of slaving, both as a practitioner and a victim, and he put his knowledge to full use. He knew that healthy slaves would bring a better price at market, and so he fed and treated his captives far better than Sharif Abdullah and most other slavers did. On the other hand, he knew which ones were fomenting trouble, and knew it was better to kill them on the spot as an example to the others, than to let any hopes of insurrection spread among the captives.

Because he was thorough, he was equally successful, and soon expanded into ivory trading as well. Within six years he had the biggest slaving and poaching operation in East Africa.

From time to time he ran across European explorers. It was said that he even spent a week with Dr. David Livingstone and left without the missionary ever knowing that he had been playing host to the slaver he most wanted to put out of business.

After America's War Between the States killed his primary market, he took a year off from his operation to go to Asia and the Arabian Peninsula and open up new ones. Upon returning he found that Abdullah's son, Sharif Ibn Jad Mahir, had appropriated all his men and headed inland, intent on carrying on his father's business. Mtepwa, who had become quite wealthy, hired some 500 *askari*, placed them under the command of the notorious ivory poacher Alfred Henry Pym, and sat back to await the results.

Three months later Pym marched some 438 men back to the Tanganyika coast. Two hundred and seventy-six were slaves that Sharif Ibn Jad Mahir had captured; the remainder were the remnants of Mtepwa's organization, who had gone to work for Sharif Ibn Jad Mahir. Mtepwa sold all 438 of them into

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bondage and built a new organization, composed of the warriors who had fought for him under Pym's leadership.

Most of the colonial powers were inclined to turn a blind eye to his practices, but the British, who were determined to put an end to slavery, issued a warrant for Mtepwa's arrest. Eventually he tired of continually looking over his shoulder, and moved his headquarters to Mozambique, where the Portuguese were happy to let him set up shop as long as he remembered that colonial palms needed constant greasing.

He was never happy there — he didn't speak Portuguese or any of the local languages — and after nine years he returned to Tanganyika, now the wealthiest black man on the continent.

One day he found among his latest batch of captives a young Acholi boy named Haradi, no more than ten years old, and decided to keep him as a personal servant rather than ship him across the ocean.

Mtepwa had never married. Most of his associates assumed that he had simply never had the time, but as the almost-nightly demands for Haradi to visit him in his tent became common knowledge, they soon revised their opinions. Mtepwa seemed besotted with his servant boy, though — doubtless remembering his own experience — he never taught Haradi to read, and promised a slow and painful death to anyone who spoke of Islam to the boy.

Then one night, after some three years had passed, Mtepwa sent for Haradi. The boy was nowhere to be found. Mtepwa awoke all his warriors and demanded that they search for him, for a leopard had been seen in the vicinity of the camp, and the slaver feared the worst.

They found Haradi an hour later, not in the jaws of a leopard, but in the arms of a young female slave they had taken from the Zaneke tribe. Mtepwa was beside himself with rage, and had the poor girl's arms and legs torn from her body.

Haradi never offered a word of protest, and never tried to defend the girl — not that it would have done any good — but the next morning he was gone, and though Mtepwa and his warriors spent almost a month searching for him, they found no trace of him.

By the end of the month Mtepwa was quite insane with rage and grief. Deciding that life was no longer worth living, he walked up to a pride of lions that were gorging themselves on a topi carcass and, striding into their midst, began cursing them and hitting them with his bare hands. Almost unbeliev-

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ably, the lions backed away from him, snarling and growling, and disappeared into the thick bush.

The next day he picked up a large stick and began beating a baby elephant with it. That should have precipitated a brutal attack by its mother — but the mother, standing only a few feet away, trumpeted in terror and raced off, the baby following her as best it could.

It was then that Mtepwa decided that he could not die, that somehow the act of dismembering the poor Zaneke girl had made him immortal. Since both incidents had occurred within sight of his superstitious followers, they fervently believed him.

Now that he was immortal, he decided that it was time to stop trying to accommodate the Europeans who had invaded his land and kept issuing warrants for his arrest. He sent a runner to the Kenya border and invited the British to meet him in battle. When the appointed day came, and the British did not show up to fight him, he confidently told his warriors that word of his immortality had reached the Europeans and that from that day forth no white men would ever be willing to oppose him. The fact that he was still in German territory, and the British had no legal right to go there, somehow managed to elude him.

He began marching his warriors inland, openly in search of slaves, and he found his share of them in the Congo. He looted villages of their men, their women, and their ivory, and finally, with almost 600 captives and half that many tusks, he turned east and began the months-long trek to the coast.

This time the British were waiting for him at the Uganda border, and they had so many armed men there that Mtepwa turned south, not for fear for his own life, but because he could not afford to lose his slaves and his ivory, and he knew that his warriors lacked his invulnerability.

He marched his army down to Lake Tanganyika, then headed east. It took him two weeks to reach the western corridor of the Serengeti, and another ten days to cross it.

One night he made camp at the lip of the Olduvai Gorge, the very place where he had gained his freedom. The fires were lit, a wildebeest was slaughtered and cooked, and as he relaxed after the meal he became aware of a buzzing among his men. Then, from out of the shadows, stepped a strangely familiar figure. It was Haradi, now fifteen years old, and as tall as Mtepwa himself.

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Mtepwa stared at him for a long moment, and suddenly all the anger seemed to drain from his face.

"I am very glad to see you again, Haradi," he said.

"I have heard that you cannot be killed," answered the boy, brandishing a spear. "I have come to see if that is true."

"We have no need to fight, you and I," said Mtepwa. "Join me in my tent, and all will be as it was."

"Once I tear your limbs from your body, *then* we will have no reason to fight," responded Haradi. "And even then, you will seem no less repulsive to me than you do now, or than you did all those many years ago."

Mtepwa jumped up, his face a mask of fury. "Do your worst, then!" he cried. "And when you realize that I cannot be harmed, I will do to you as I did to the Zaneke girl!"

Haradi made no reply, but hurled his spear at Mtepwa. It went into the slaver's body, and was thrown with such force that the point emerged a good six inches on the other side. Mtepwa stared at Haradi with disbelief, moaned once, and tumbled down the rocky slopes of the gorge.

Haradi looked around at the warriors. "Is there any among you who dispute my right to take Mtepwa's place?" he asked confidently.

A burly Makonde stood up to challenge him, and within thirty seconds Haradi, too, was dead.

The British were waiting for them when they reached Zanzibar. The slaves were freed, the ivory confiscated, the warriors arrested and forced to serve as laborers on the Mombasa/Uganda Railway. Two of them were later killed and eaten by lions in the Tsavo District.

By the time Lieutenant-Colonel J.H. Patterson shot the notorious Man-Eaters of Tsavo, the railway had almost reached the shanty town of Nairobi, and Mtepwa's name was so thoroughly forgotten that it was misspelled in the only history book in which it appeared.

* * *

"Amazing!" said the Appraiser. "I knew they enslaved many races throughout the galaxy — but to enslave *themselves*! It is almost beyond belief!"

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I had rested from my efforts, and then related the story of Mtepwa.

"All ideas must begin somewhere," said Bellidore placidly. "This one obviously began on Earth."

"It is barbaric!" muttered the Appraiser.

Bellidore turned to me. "Man never attempted to subjugate *your* race, He Who Views. Why was that?"

"We had nothing that he wanted."

"Can you remember the galaxy when Man dominated it?" asked the Appraiser.

"I can remember the galaxy when Man's progenitors killed Bokatu and Enkatai," I replied truthfully.

"Did you ever have any dealings with Man?"

"None. Man had no use for us."

"But did he not destroy profligately things for which he had no use?"

"No," I said. "He took what he wanted, and he destroyed that which threatened him. The rest he ignored."

"Such arrogance!"

"Such practicality," said Bellidore.

"You call genocide on a galactic scale *practical*?" demanded the Appraiser.

"From Man's point of view, it was," answered Bellidore. "It got him what he wanted with a minimum of risk and effort. Consider that one single race, born not five hundred yards from us, at one time ruled an empire of more than a million worlds. Almost every civilized race in the galaxy spoke Terran."

"Upon pain of death."

"That is true," agreed Bellidore. "I did not say Man was an angel. Only that, if he was indeed a devil, he was an efficient one."

It was time for me to assimilate the third artifact, which the Historian and the Appraiser seemed to think was the handle of a knife, but even as I moved off to perform my function, I could not help but listen to the speculation that was taking place.

"Given his bloodlust and his efficiency," said the Appraiser, "I'm surprised that he lived long enough to reach the stars."

"It *is* surprising in a way," agreed Bellidore. "The Historian tells me that Man was not always homogeneous, that early in his history there were several variations of the species. He was divided by color, by belief, by

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territory." He sighed. "Still, he must have learned to live in peace with his fellow man. That much, at least, accrues to his credit."

I reached the artifact with Bellidore's words still in my ears, and began to engulf it...

* * *

MARY LEAKEY pressed against the horn of the Landrover. Inside the museum, her husband turned to the young uniformed officer.

"I can't think of any instructions to give you," he said. "The museum's not open to the public yet, and we're a good 300 kilometers from Kikuyuland."

"I'm just following my orders, Dr. Leakey," replied the officer.

"Well, I suppose it doesn't hurt to be safe," acknowledged Leakey. "There are a lot of Kikuyu who want me dead even though I spoke up for Kenyatta at his trial." He walked to the door. "If the discoveries at Lake Turkana prove interesting, we could be gone as long as a month. Otherwise, we should be back within ten to twelve days."

"No problem, sir. The museum will still be here when you get back."

"I never doubted it," said Leakey, walking out and joining his wife in the vehicle.

Lieutenant Ian Chelmswood stood in the doorway and watched the Leakeys, accompanied by two military vehicles, start down the red dirt road. Within seconds the car was obscured by dust, and he stepped back into the building and closed the door to avoid being covered by it. The heat was oppressive, and he removed his jacket and holster and laid them neatly across one of the small display cases.

It was strange. All the images he had seen of African wildlife, from the German Schillings' old still photographs to the American Johnson's motion pictures, had led him to believe that East Africa was a wonderland of green grass and clear water. No one had ever mentioned the dust, but that was the one memory of it that he would take home with him.

Well, not quite the only one. He would never forget the morning the alarm had sounded back when he was stationed in Nanyuki. He arrived at the settlers' farm and found the entire family cut to ribbons and all their cattle

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mutilated, most with their genitals cut off, many missing ears and eyes. But as horrible as that was, the picture he would carry to his grave was the kitten impaled on a dagger and pinned to the mailbox. It was the Mau Mau's signature, just in case anyone thought some madman had run berserk among the cattle and the humans.

Chelmswood didn't understand the politics of it. He didn't know who had started it, who had precipitated the war. It made no difference to him. He was just a soldier, following orders, and if those orders would take him back to Nanyuki so that he could kill the men who had committed those atrocities, so much the better.

But in the meantime, he had pulled what he considered Idiot Duty. There had been a very mild outburst of violence in Arusha, not really Mau Mau but rather a show of support for Kenya's Kikuyu, and his unit had been transferred there. Then the government found out that Professor Leakey, whose scientific finds had made Olduvai Gorge almost a household word among East Africans, had been getting death threats. Over his objections, they had insisted on providing him with bodyguards. Most of the men from Chelmswood's unit would accompany Leakey on his trip to Lake Turkana, but someone had to stay behind to guard the museum, and it was just his bad luck that his name had been atop the duty roster.

It wasn't even a museum, really, not the kind of museum his parents had taken him to see in London. *Those* were museums; this was just a two-room mud-walled structure with perhaps a hundred of Leakey's finds. Ancient arrowheads, some oddly-shaped stones that had functioned as prehistoric tools, a couple of bones that obviously weren't from monkeys but that Chelmswood was certain were not from any creature *he* was related to.

Leakey had hung some crudely drawn charts on the wall, charts that showed what he believed to be the evolution of some small, grotesque, apelike beasts into *Homo sapiens*. There were photographs, too, showing some of the finds that had been sent on to Nairobi. It seemed that even if this gorge was the birthplace of the race, nobody really wanted to visit it. All the best finds were shipped back to Nairobi and then to the British Museum. In fact, this wasn't a museum at all, decided Chelmswood, but rather a holding area for the better specimens until they could be sent elsewhere.

It was strange to think of life starting here in this gorge. If there was an uglier spot in Africa, he had yet to come across it. And while he didn't accept

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Genesis or any of that religious nonsense, it bothered him to think that the first human beings to walk the Earth might have been black. He'd hardly had any exposure to blacks when he was growing up in the Cotswolds, but he'd seen enough of what they could do since coming to British East, and he was appalled by their savagery and barbarism.

And what about those crazy Americans, wringing their hands and saying that colonialism had to end? If they had seen what *he'd* seen on that farm in Nanyuki, they'd know that the only thing that was keeping all of East Africa from exploding into an unholy conflagration of blood and butchery was the British presence. Certainly, there were parallels between the Mau Mau and America: both had been colonized by the British and both wanted their independence...but there all similarity ended. The Americans wrote a Declaration outlining their grievances, and then they fielded an army and fought the British *soldiers*. What did chopping up innocent children and pinning cats to mailboxes have in common with that? If he had his way, he'd march in half a million British troops, wipe out every last Kikuyu — except for the good ones, the loyal ones — and solve the problem once and for all.

He wandered over to the cabinet where Leakey kept his beer and pulled out a warm bottle. Safari brand. He opened it and took a long swallow, then made a face. If that's what people drank on safari, he'd have to remember never to go on one.

And yet he knew that someday he *would* go on safari, hopefully before he was mustered out and sent home. Parts of the country were so damned beautiful, dust or no dust, and he liked the thought of sitting beneath a shade tree, cold drink in hand, while his body servant cooled him with a fan made of ostrich feathers and he and his white hunter discussed the day's kills and what they would go out after tomorrow. It wasn't the shooting that was important, they'd both reassure themselves, but rather the thrill of the hunt. Then he'd have a couple of his black boys draw his bath, and he'd bathe and prepare for dinner. Funny how he had fallen into the habit of calling them boys; most of them were far older than he.

But while they weren't boys, they *were* children in need of guidance and civilizing. Take those Maasai, for example; proud, arrogant bastards. They looked great on postcards, but try *dealing* with them. They acted as if they had a direct line to God, that He had told them they were His chosen people. The more Chelmswood thought about it, the more surprised he was that it

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was the Kikuyu that had begun Mau Mau rather than the Maasai. And come to think of it, he'd noticed four or five Maasai *elmorani* hanging around the museum. He'd have to keep an eye on them...

"Excuse, please?" said a high-pitched voice, and Chelmswood turned to see a small skinny black boy, no more than ten years old, standing in the doorway.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"Doctor Mister Leakey, he promise me candy," said the boy, stepping inside the building.

"Go away," said Chelmswood irritably. "We don't have any candy here."

"Yes yes," said the boy, stepping forward. "Every day."

"He gives you candy every day?"

The boy nodded his head and smiled.

"Where does he keep it?"

The boy shrugged. "Maybe in there?" he said, pointing to a cabinet.

Chelmswood walked to the cabinet and opened it. There was nothing in it but four jars containing primitive teeth.

"I don't see any," he said. "You'll have to wait until Dr. Leakey comes back."

Two tears trickled down the boy's cheek. "But Doctor Mister Leakey, he *promise*!"

Chelmswood looked around. "I don't know where it is."

The boy began crying in earnest.

"Be quiet!" snapped Chelmswood. "I'll look for it."

"Maybe next room," suggested the boy.

"Come along," said Chelmswood, walking through the doorway to the adjoining room. He looked around, hands on hips, trying to imagine where Leakey had hidden the candy.

"This place maybe," said the boy, pointing to a closet.

Chelmswood opened the closet. It contained two spades, three picks, and an assortment of small brushes, all of which he assumed were used by the Leakeys for their work.

"Nothing here," he said, closing the door.

He turned to face the boy, but found the room empty.

"Little bugger was lying all along," he muttered. "Probably ran away to save himself a beating."

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He walked back into the main room — and found himself facing a well-built black man holding a machete-like *panga* in his right hand.

"What's going on here?" snapped Chelmswood.

"Freedom is going on here, Lieutenant," said the black man in near-perfect English. "I was sent to kill Dr. Leakey, but you will have to do."

"Why are you killing anyone?" demanded Chelmswood. "What did we ever do to the Maasai?"

"I will let the Maasai answer that. Any one of them could take one look at me and tell you that I am Kikuyu — but we are all the same to you British, aren't we?"

Chelmswood reached for his gun and suddenly realized he had left it on a display case.

"You all look like cowardly savages to me!"

"Why? Because we do not meet you in battle?" The black man's face filled with fury. "You take our land away, you forbid us to own weapons, you even make it a crime for us to carry spears — and then you call us savages when we don't march in formation against your guns!" He spat contemptuously on the floor. "We fight you in the only way that is left to us."

"It's a big country, big enough for both races," said Chelmswood.

"If we came to England and took away your best farmland and forced you to work for us, would you think England was big enough for both races?"

"I'm not political," said Chelmswood, edging another step closer to his weapon. "I'm just doing my job."

"And your job is to keep two hundred whites on land that once held a million Kikuyu," said the black man, his face reflecting his hatred.

"There'll be a lot less than a million when *we* get through with you!" hissed Chelmswood, diving for his gun.

Quick as he was, the black man was faster, and with a single swipe of his *panga* he almost severed the Englishman's right hand from his wrist. Chelmswood bellowed in pain, and spun around, presenting his back to the Kikuyu as he reached for the pistol with his other hand.

The *panga* came down again, practically splitting him open, but as he fell he managed to get his fingers around the handle of his pistol and pull the trigger. The bullet struck the black man in the chest, and he, too, collapsed to the floor.

"You've killed me!" moaned Chelmswood. "Why would anyone want

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to kill me?"

"You have so much and we have so little," whispered the black man. "Why must you have what is ours, too?"

"What did I ever do to you?" asked Chelmswood.

"You came here. That was enough," said the black man. "Filthy English!" He closed his eyes and lay still.

"Bloody nigger!" slurred Chelmswood, and died.

Outside, the four Maasai paid no attention to the tumult within. They let the small Kikuyu boy leave without giving him so much as a glance. The business of inferior races was none of their concern.

* * *

"These notions of superiority among members of the same race are very difficult to comprehend," said Bellidore. "Are you *sure* you read the artifact properly, He Who Views?"

"I do not *read* artifacts," I replied. "I *assimilate* them. I become one with them. Everything *they* have experienced, *I* experience." I paused. "There can be no mistake."

"Well, it is difficult to fathom, especially in a species that would one day control most of the galaxy. Did they think *every* race they met was inferior to them?"

"They certainly behaved as if they did," said the Historian. "They seemed to respect only those races that stood up to them — and even then they felt that militarily defeating them was proof of their superiority."

"And yet we know from ancient records that primitive man worshipped non-sentient animals," put in the Exobiologist.

"They must not have survived for any great length of time," suggested the Historian. "If Man treated the races of the galaxy with contempt, how much worse must he have treated the poor creatures with whom he shared his home world?"

"Perhaps he viewed them much the same as he viewed my own race," I offered. "If they had nothing he wanted, if they presented no threat..."

"They would have had something he wanted," said the Exobiologist. "He was a predator. They would have had meat."

"And land," added the Historian. "If even the galaxy was not enough to

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quench Man's thirst for territory, think how unwilling he would have been to share his own world."

"It is a question I suspect will never be answered," said Bellidore.

"Unless the answer lies in one of the remaining artifacts," agreed the Exobiologist.

I'm sure the remark was not meant to jar me from my lethargy, but it occurred to me that it had been half a day since I had assimilated the knife handle, and I had regained enough of my strength to examine the next artifact.

It was a metal stylus...

* * *

February 15, 2103:

Well, we finally got here! The Supermole got us through the tunnel from New York to London in just over four hours. Even so we were twenty minutes late, missed our connection, and had to wait another five hours for the next flight to Khartoum. From there our means of transport got increasingly more primitive — jet planes to Nairobi and Arusha — and then a quick shuttle to our campsite, but we've finally put civilization behind us. I've never seen open spaces like this before; you're barely aware of the skyscrapers of Nyerere, the closest town.

After an orientation speech telling us what to expect and how to behave on safari, we got the afternoon off to meet our traveling companions. I'm the youngest member of the group: a trip like this just costs too much for most people my age to afford. Of course, most people my age don't have an Uncle Reuben who dies and leaves them a ton of money. (Well, it's probably about eight ounces of money, now that the safari is paid for. Ha ha.)

The lodge is quite rustic. They have quaint microwaves for warming our food, although most of us will be eating at the restaurants. I understand the Japanese and Brazilian ones are the most popular, the former for the food — real fish — and the latter for the entertainment. My roommate is Mr. Shiboni, an elderly Japanese gentleman who tells me he has been saving his money for fifteen years to come on this safari. He seems pleasant and good-natured; I hope he can survive the rigors of the trip.

I had really wanted a shower, just to get in the spirit of things, but water is scarce here, and it looks like I'll have to settle for the same old chemical

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dryshower. I know, I know, it disinfects as well as cleanses, but if I wanted all the comforts of home, I'd have stayed home and saved $150,000.

February 16:

We met our guide today. I don't know why, but he doesn't quite fit my preconception of an African safari guide. I was expecting some grizzled old veteran who had a wealth of stories to tell, who had maybe even seen a civet cat or a duiker before they became extinct. What we got was Kevin Ole Tambake, a young Maasai who can't be twenty-five years old and dresses in a suit while we all wear our khakis. Still, he's lived here all his life, so I suppose he knows his way around.

And I'll give him this: he's a wonderful storyteller. He spent half an hour telling us myths about how his people used to live in huts called manyattas, *and how their rite of passage to manhood was to kill a lion with a spear. As if the government would let anyone kill an animal!*

We spent the morning driving down into the Ngorongoro Crater. It's a collapsed caldera, *or volcano, that was once taller than Kilimanjaro itself. Kevin says it used to teem with game, though I can't see how, since any game standing atop it when it collapsed would have been instantly killed.*

I think the real reason we went there was just to get the kinks out of our safari vehicle and learn the proper protocol. Probably just as well. The air-conditioning wasn't working right in two of the compartments, the service mechanism couldn't get the temperature right on the iced drinks, and once, when we thought we saw a bird, three of us buzzed Kevin at the same time and jammed his communication line.

In the afternoon we went out to Serengeti. Kevin says it used to extend all the way to the Kenya border, but now it's just a 20-square-mile park adjacent to the Crater. About an hour into the game run we saw a ground squirrel, but he disappeared into a hole before I could adjust my holo camera. Still, he was very impressive. Varying shades of brown, with dark eyes and a fluffy tail. Kevin estimated that he went almost three pounds, and says he hasn't seen one that big since he was a boy.

Just before we returned to camp, Kevin got word on the radio from another driver that they had spotted two starlings nesting in a tree about eight miles north and east of us. The vehicle's computer told us we wouldn't be able to reach it before dark, so Kevin had it lock the spot in its memory

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and promised us that we'd go there first thing in the morning.

I opted for the Brazilian restaurant, and spent a few pleasant hours listening to the live band. A very nice end to the first full day of safari.

February 17:

We left at dawn in search of the starlings, and though we found the tree where they had been spotted, we never did see them. One of the passengers —I think it was the little man from Burma, though I'm not sure— must have complained, because Kevin soon announced to the entire party that this was a safari, *that there was no guarantee of seeing any particular bird or animal, and that while he would do his best for us, one could never be certain where the game might be.*

And then, just as he was talking, a banded mongoose almost a foot long appeared out of nowhere. It seemed to pay no attention to us, and Kevin announced that we were killing the motor and going into hover mode so the noise wouldn't scare it away.

After a minute or two everyone on the right side of the vehicle had gotten their holographs, and we slowly spun on our axis so that the left side could see him — but the movement must have scared him off, because though the maneuver took less than thirty seconds, he was nowhere to be seen when we came to rest again.

Kevin announced that the vehicle had captured the mongoose on its automated holos, and copies would be made available to anyone who had missed their holo opportunity.

We were feeling great — the right side of the vehicle, anyway — when we stopped for lunch, and during our afternoon game run we saw three yellow weaver birds building their spherical nests in a tree. Kevin let us out, warning us not to approach closer than thirty yards, and we spent almost an hour watching and holographing them.

All in all, a very satisfying day.

February 18:

Today we left camp about an hour after sunrise, and went to a new location: Olduvai Gorge.

Kevin announced that we would spend our last two days here, that with the encroachment of the cities and farms on all the flat land, the remaining

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big game was pretty much confined to the gullies and slopes of the gorge.

No vehicle, not even our specially-equipped one, was capable of navigating its way through the gorge, so we all got out and began walking in single file behind Kevin.

Most of us found it very difficult to keep up with Kevin. He clambered up and down the rocks as if he'd been doing it all his life, whereas I can't remember the last time I saw a stair that didn't move when I stood on it. We had trekked for perhaps half an hour when I heard one of the men at the back of our strung-out party give a cry and point to a spot at the bottom of the gorge, and we all looked and saw something racing away at phenomenal speed.

"Another squirrel?" I asked.

Kevin just smiled.

The man behind me said he thought it was a mongoose.

"What you saw," said Kevin, "was a dik-dik, the last surviving African antelope."

"How big was it?" asked a woman.

"About average size," said Kevin. "Perhaps ten inches at the shoulder."

Imagine anything ten inches high being called average!

Kevin explained that dik-diks were very territorial, and that this one wouldn't stray far from his home area. Which meant that if we were patient and quiet — and lucky — we'd be able to spot him again.

I asked Kevin how many dik-diks lived in the gorge, and he scratched his head and considered it for a moment and then guessed that there might be as many as ten. (And Yellowstone has only nineteen rabbits left! Is it any wonder that all the serious animal buffs come to Africa?)

We kept walking for another hour, and then broke for lunch, while Kevin gave us the history of the place, telling us all about Dr. Leakey's finds. There were probably still more skeletons to be dug up, he guessed, but the government didn't want to frighten any animals away from what had become their last refuge, so the bones would have to wait for some future generation to unearth them. Roughly translated, that meant that Tanzania wasn't going to give up the revenues from 300 tourists a week and turn over the crown jewel in their park system to a bunch of anthropologists. I can't say that I blame them.

Other parties had begun pouring into the gorge, and I think the entire

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safari population must have totaled almost seventy by the time lunch was over. The guides each seemed to have "their" areas marked out, and I noticed that rarely did we get within a quarter mile of any other parties.

Kevin asked us if we wanted to sit in the shade until the heat of the day had passed, but since this was our next-to-last day on safari we voted overwhelmingly to proceed as soon as we were through eating.

It couldn't have been ten minutes later that the disaster occurred. We were clambering down a steep slope in single file, Kevin in the lead as usual, and me right behind him, when I heard a grunt and then a surprised yell, and I looked back to see Mr. Shiboni tumbling down the path. Evidently he'd lost his footing, and we could hear the bones in his leg snap as he hurtled toward us.

Kevin positioned himself to stop him, and almost got knocked down the gorge himself before he finally stopped poor Mr. Shiboni. Then he knelt down next to the old gentleman to tend to his broken leg — but as he did so his keen eyes spotted something we all had missed, and suddenly he was bounding up the slopes like a monkey. He stopped where Mr. Shiboni had initially stumbled, squatted down, and examined something. Then, looking like Death itself, he picked up the object and brought it back down the path.

It was a dead lizard, fully grown, almost eight inches long, and smashed flat by Mr. Shiboni. It was impossible to say whether his fall was caused by stepping on it, or whether it simply couldn't get out of the way once he began tumbling... but it made no difference: he was responsible for the death of an animal in a National Park.

I tried to remember the release we had signed, giving the Park System permission to instantly withdraw money from our accounts should we destroy an animal for any reason, even self-protection. I knew that the absolute minimum penalty was $50,000, but I think that was for two of the more common birds, and that ugaama and gecko lizards were in the $70,000 range.

Kevin held the lizard up for all of us to see, and told us that should legal action ensue, we were all witnesses to what had happened.

Mr. Shiboni groaned in pain, and Kevin said that there was no sense wasting the lizard, so he gave it to me to hold while he splinted Mr. Shiboni's leg and summoned the paramedics on the radio.

I began examining the little lizard. Its feet were finely-shaped, its tail

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long and elegant, but it was the colors that made the most lasting impression on me: a reddish head, a blue body, and gray legs, the color growing lighter as it reached the claws. A beautiful, beautiful thing, even in death.

After the paramedics had taken Mr. Shiboni back to the lodge, Kevin spent the next hour showing us how the ugaama lizard functioned: how its eyes could see in two directions at once, how its claws allowed it to hang upside down from any uneven surface, and how efficiently its jaws could crack the carapaces of the insects it caught. Finally, in view of the tragedy, and also because he wanted to check on Mr. Shiboni's condition, Kevin suggested that we call it a day.

None of us objected — we knew Kevin would have hours of extra work, writing up the incident and convincing the Park Department that his safari company was not responsible for it — but still we felt cheated, since there was only one day left. I think Kevin knew it, because just before we reached the lodge he promised us a special treat tomorrow.

I've been awake half the night wondering what it could be? Can he possibly know where the other dik-diks are? Or could the legends of a last flamingo possibly be true?

February 19:

We were all excited when we climbed aboard the vehicle this morning. Everyone kept asking Kevin what his "special treat" was, but he merely smiled and kept changing the subject. Finally we reached Olduvai Gorge and began walking, only this time we seemed to be going to a specific location, and Kevin hardly stopped to try to spot the dik-dik.

We climbed down twisting, winding paths, tripping over tree roots, cutting our arms and legs on thorn bushes, but nobody objected, for Kevin seemed so confident of his surprise that all these hardships were forgotten.

Finally we reached the bottom of the gorge and began walking along a flat winding path. Still, by the time we were ready to stop for lunch, we hadn't seen a thing. As we sat beneath the shade of an acacia tree, eating, Kevin pulled out his radio and conversed with the other guides. One group had seen three dik-diks, and another had found a lilac-breasted roller's nest with two hatchlings in it. Kevin is very competitive, and ordinarily news like that would have had him urging everyone to finish eating quickly so that we would not return to the lodge having seen less than everyone else, but this

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time he just smiled and told the other guides that we had seen nothing on the floor of the gorge and that the game seemed to have moved out, perhaps in search of water.

Then, when lunch was over, Kevin walked about fifty yards away, disappeared into a cave, and emerged a moment later with a small wooden cage. There was a little brown bird in it, and while I was thrilled to be able to see it close up, I felt somehow disappointed that this was to be the special treat.

"Have you ever seen a honey guide?" he asked.

We all admitted that we hadn't, and he explained that that was the name of the small brown bird.

I asked why it was called that, since it obviously didn't produce honey, and seemed incapable of replacing Kevin as our guide, and he smiled again.

"Do you see that tree?" he asked, pointing to a tree perhaps seventy-five yards away. There was a huge beehive on a low-hanging branch.

"Yes," I said.

"Then watch," he said, opening the cage and releasing the bird. It stood still for a moment, then fluttered its wings and took off in the direction of the tree.

"He is making sure there is honey there," explained Kevin, pointing to the bird as it circled the hive.

"Where is he going now?" I asked, as the bird suddenly flew down the river bed.

"To find his partner."

"Partner?" I asked, confused.

"Wait and see," said Kevin, sitting down with his back propped against a large rock.

We all followed suit and sat in the shade, our binoculars and holo cameras trained on the tree. After almost an hour nothing had happened, and some of us were getting restless, when Kevin tensed and pointed up the river bed.

"There!" he whispered. I looked in the direction he was pointing, and there, following the bird, which was flying just ahead of him and chirping frantically, was an enormous black-and-white animal, the largest I have ever seen.

"What is it?" I whispered.

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"A honey badger," answered Kevin softly. "They were thought to be extinct twenty years ago, but a mated pair took sanctuary in Olduvai. This is the fourth generation to be born here."

"Is he going to eat the bird?" asked one of the party.

"No," whispered Kevin. "The bird will lead him to the honey, and after he has pulled down the nest and eaten his fill, he will leave some for the bird."

And it was just as Kevin said. The honey badger climbed the bole of the tree and knocked off the beehive with a forepaw, then climbed back down and broke it apart, oblivious to the stings of the bees. We caught the whole fantastic scene on our holos, and when he was done he did indeed leave some honey for the honey guide.

Later, while Kevin was recapturing the bird and putting it back in its cage, the rest of us discussed what we had seen. I thought the honey badger must have weighed forty-five pounds, though less excitable members of the party put its weight at closer to thirty-six or thirty-seven. Whichever it was, the creature was enormous. The discussion then shifted to how big a tip to leave for Kevin, for he had certainly earned one.

As I write this final entry in my safari diary, I am still trembling with the excitement that can only come from encountering big game in the wild. Prior to this afternoon, I had some doubts about the safari — I felt it was overpriced, or that perhaps my expectations had been too high — but now I know that it was worth every penny, and I have a feeling that I am leaving some part of me behind here, and that I will never be truly content until I return to this last bastion of the wilderness.

* * *

THE CAMP was abuzz with excitement. Just when we were sure that there were no more treasures to unearth, the Stardust Twins had found three small pieces of bone, attached together with a wire — obviously a human artifact.

"But the dates are wrong," said the Historian, after examining the bones thoroughly with its equipment. "This is a primitive piece of jewelry — for the adornment of savages, one might say — and yet the bones and wire both date from centuries after Man discovered space travel."

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"Do you..."

"...deny that we..."

"...found it in the..."

"...gorge?" demanded the Twins.

"I believe you," said the Historian. "I simply state that it seems to be an anachronism."

"It is our find, and..."

"...it will bear our name."

"No one is denying your right of discovery," said Bellidore. "It is simply that you have presented us with a mystery."

"Give it to..."

"...He Who Views, and he..."

"...will solve the mystery."

"I will do my best," I said. "But it has not been long enough since I assimilated the stylus. I must rest and regain my strength."

"That is..."

"...acceptable."

We let the Moriteu go about brushing and cleaning the artifact, while we speculated on why a primitive fetish should exist in the starfaring age. Finally the Exobiologist got to her feet.

"I am going back into the gorge," she announced. "If the Stardust Twins could find this, perhaps there are other things we have overlooked. After all, it is an enormous area." She paused and looked at the rest of us. "Would anyone care to come with me?"

It was nearing the end of the day, and no one volunteered, and finally the Exobiologist turned and began walking toward the path that led down into the depths of Olduvai Gorge.

It was dark when I finally felt strong enough to assimilate the jewelry. I spread my essence about the bones and the wire and soon became one with them...

* * *

His name was Joseph Meromo, and he could live with the money but not the guilt.

It had begun with the communication from Brussels, and the veiled

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suggestion from the head of the multinational conglomerate headquartered there. They had a certain commodity to get rid of. They had no place to get rid of it. Could Tanzania help?

Meromo had told them he would look into it, but he doubted that his government could be of use.

Just *try*, came the reply.

In fact, more than the reply came. The next day a private courier delivered a huge wad of large-denomination bills, with a polite note thanking Meromo for his efforts on their behalf.

Meromo knew a bribe when he saw one — he'd certainly taken enough in his career — but he'd never seen one remotely the size of this one. And not even for helping them, but merely for being willing to explore possibilities.

Well, he had thought, why not? What could they conceivably have? A couple of containers of toxic waste? A few plutonium rods? You bury them deep enough in the earth and no one would ever know or care. Wasn't that what the Western countries did?

Of course, there was the Denver Disaster, and that little accident that made the Thames undrinkable for almost a century, but the only reason they popped so quickly to mind is because they were the *exceptions*, not the rule. There were thousands of dumping sites around the world, and ninety-nine percent of them caused no problems at all.

Meromo had his computer cast a holographic map of Tanzania above his desk. He looked at it, frowned, added topographical features, then began studying it in earnest.

If he decided to help them dump the stuff, whatever it was — and he told himself that he was still uncommitted — where would be the best place to dispose of it?

Off the coast? No, the fishermen would pull it up two minutes later, take it to the press, and raise enough hell to get him fired, and possibly even cause the rest of the government to resign. The party really couldn't handle any more scandals this year.

The Selous Province? Maybe five centuries ago, when it was the last wilderness on the continent, but not now, not with a thriving, semi-autonomous city-state of fifty-two million people where once there had been nothing but elephants and almost-impenetrable thorn bush.

Lake Victoria? No. Same problem with the fishermen. Dar es Salaam? It

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was a possibility. Close enough to the coast to make transport easy, practically deserted since Dodoma had become the new capital of the country.

But Dar es Salaam had been hit by an earthquake twenty years ago, when Meromo was still a boy, and he couldn't take the chance of another one exposing or breaking open whatever it was that he planned to hide.

He continued going over the map: Gombe, Ruaha, Iringa, Mbeya, Mtwara, Tarengire, Olduvai...

He stopped and stared at Olduvai, then called up all available data.

Almost a mile deep. That was in its favor. No animals left. Better still. No settlements on its steep slopes. Only a handful of Maasai still living in the area, no more than two dozen families, and they were too arrogant to pay any attention to what the government was doing. Of that Meromo was sure: he himself was a Maasai.

So he strung it out for as long as he could, collected cash gifts for almost two years, and finally gave them a delivery date.

Meromo stared out the window of his thirty-fourth floor office, past the bustling city of Dodoma, off to the east, to where he imagined Olduvai Gorge was.

It had seemed so simple. Yes, he was paid a lot of money, a disproportionate amount — but these multinationals had money to burn. It was just supposed to be a few dozen plutonium rods, or so he had thought. How was he to know that they were speaking of forty-two *tons* of nuclear waste?

There was no returning the money. Even if he wanted to, he could hardly expect them to come back and pull all that deadly material back out of the ground. Probably it was safe, probably no one would ever know...

But it haunted his days, and even worse, it began haunting his nights as well, appearing in various guises in his dreams. Sometimes it was as carefully sealed containers, sometimes it was as ticking bombs, sometimes a disaster had already occurred and all he could see were the charred bodies of Maasai children spread across the lip of the gorge.

For almost eight months he fought his devils alone, but eventually he realized that he must have help. The dreams not only haunted him at night, but invaded the day as well. He would be sitting at a staff meeting, and suddenly he would imagine he was sitting among the emaciated, sore-covered bodies of the Olduvai Maasai. He would be reading a book, and the words seemed to change and he would be reading that Joseph Meromo had

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been sentenced to death for his greed. He would watch a holo of the Titanic disaster, and suddenly he was viewing some variation of the Olduvai Disaster.

Finally he went to a psychiatrist, and because he was a Maasai, he choose a Maasai psychiatrist. Fearing the doctor's contempt, Meromo would not state explicitly what was causing the nightmares and intrusions, and after almost half a year's worth of futile attempts to cure him, the psychiatrist announced that he could do no more.

"Then am I to be cursed with these dreams forever?" asked Meromo.

"Perhaps not," said the psychiatrist. "*I* cannot help you, but just possibly there is one man who can."

He rummaged through his desk and came up with a small white card. On it was written a single word: MULEWO.

"This is his business card," said the psychiatrist. "Take it."

"There is no address on it, no means of communicating with him," said Meromo. "How will I contact him?"

"He will contact you."

"You will give him my name?"

The psychiatrist shook his head. "I will not have to. Just keep the card on your person. He will know you require his services."

Meromo felt like he was being made the butt of some joke he didn't understand, but he dutifully put the card in his pocket and soon forgot about it.

Two weeks later, as he was drinking at a bar, putting off going home to sleep as long as he could, a small woman approached him.

"Are you Joseph Meromo?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Please follow me."

"Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"You have business with Mulewo, do you not?" she said.

Meromo fell into step behind her, at least as much to avoid going home as from any belief that this mysterious man with no first name could help him. They went out to the street, turned left, walked in silence for three blocks, and turned right, coming to a halt at the front door to a steel-and-glass skyscraper.

"The sixty-third floor," she said. "He is expecting you."

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"You're not coming with me?" asked Meromo.

She shook her head. "My job is done." She turned and walked off into the night.

Meromo looked up at the top of the building. It seemed residential. He considered his options, finally shrugged, and walk into the lobby.

"You're here for Mulewo," said the doorman. It was not a question. "Go to the elevator on the left."

Meromo did as he was told. The elevator was paneled with an oiled wood, and smelled fresh and sweet. It operated on voice command and quickly took him to the sixty-third floor. When he emerged he found himself in an elegantly decorated corridor, with ebony wainscotting and discreetly placed mirrors. He walked past three unmarked doors, wondering how he was supposed to know which apartment belonged to Mulewo, and finally came to one that was partially open.

"Come in, Joseph Meromo," said a hoarse voice from within.

Meromo opened the door the rest of the way, stepped into the apartment, and blinked.

Sitting on a torn rug was an old man, wearing nothing but a red cloth gathered at the shoulder. The walls were covered by reed matting, and a noxious-smelling caldron bubbled in the fireplace. A torch provided the only illumination.

"What *is* this?" asked Meromo, ready to step back into the corridor if the old man appeared as irrational as his surroundings.

"Come sit across from me, Joseph Meromo," said the old man. "Surely this is less frightening than your nightmares."

"What do you know about my nightmares?" demanded Meromo.

"I know why you have them. I know what lies buried at the bottom of Olduvai Gorge."

Meromo shut the door quickly. "Who told you?"

"No one told me. I have peered into your dreams, and sifted through them until I found the truth. Come sit."

Meromo walked to where the old man indicated and sat down carefully, trying not to get too much dirt on his freshly pressed outfit.

"Are you Mulewo?" he asked.

The old man nodded. "I am Mulewo."

"How do you know these things about me?"

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"I am a *laibon*," said Mulewo.

"A witch doctor?"

"It is a dying art," answered Mulewo. "I am the last practitioner."

"I thought *laibons* cast spells and created curses."

"They also remove curses — and your nights, and even your days, are cursed, are they not?"

"You seem to know all about it."

"I know that you have done a wicked thing, and that you are haunted not only by the ghost of it, but by the ghosts of the future as well."

"And you can end the dreams?"

"That is why I have summoned you here."

"But if I did such a terrible thing, why do you *want* to help me?"

"I do not make moral judgments. I am here only to help the Maasai."

"And what about the Maasai who live by the gorge?" asked Meromo. "The ones who haunt my dreams?"

"When they ask for help, then I will help them."

"Can you cause the material that's buried there to vanish?"

Mulewo shook his head. "I cannot undo what has been done. I cannot even assuage your guilt, for it is a just guilt. All I can do is banish it from your dreams."

"I'll settle for that," said Meromo.

There was an uneasy silence.

"What do I do now?" asked Meromo.

"Bring me a tribute befitting the magnitude of the service I shall perform."

"I can write you a check right now, or have money transferred from my account to your own."

"I have more money than I need. I must have a tribute."

"But — "

"Bring it back tomorrow night," said Mulewo.

Meromo stared at the old *laibon* for a long minute, then got up and left without another word.

He called in sick the next morning, then went to two of Dodoma's better antique shops. Finally he found what he was looking for, charged it to his personal account, and took it home with him. He was afraid to nap before dinner, so he simply read a book all afternoon, then ate a hasty meal and

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returned to Mulewo's apartment.

"What have you brought me?" asked Mulewo.

Meromo laid the package down in front of the old man. "A headdress made from the skin of a lion," he answered. "They told me it was worn by Sendayo himself, the greatest of all *laibons*."

"It was not," said Mulewo, without unwrapping the package. "But it is a sufficient tribute nonetheless." He reached beneath his red cloth and withdrew a small necklace, holding it out for Meromo.

"What is this for?" asked Meromo, examining the necklace. It was made of small bones that had been strung together.

"You must wear it tonight when you go to sleep," explained the old man. "It will take all your visions unto itself. Then, tomorrow, you must go to Olduvai Gorge and throw it down to the bottom, so that the visions may lie side by side with the reality."

"And that's all?"

"That is all."

Meromo went back to his apartment, donned the necklace, and went to sleep. That night his dreams were worse than they had ever been before.

In the morning he put the necklace into a pocket and had a government plane fly him to Arusha. From there he rented a ground vehicle, and two hours later he was standing on the edge of the gorge. There was no sign of the buried material.

He took the necklace in his hand and hurled it far out over the lip of the gorge.

His nightmares vanished that night.

One hundred thirty-four years later, mighty Kilimanjaro shuddered as the long-dormant volcano within it came briefly to life.

One hundred miles away, the ground shifted on the floor of Olduvai Gorge, and three of the lead-lined containers broke open.

Joseph Meromo was long dead by that time; and, unfortunately, there were no *laibons* remaining to aid those people who were now compelled to live Meromo's nightmares.

* * *

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I had examined the necklace in my own quarters, and when I came out to report my findings, I discovered that the entire camp was in a tumultuous state.

"What has happened?" I asked Bellidore.

"The Exobiologist has not returned from the gorge," he said.

"How long has she been gone?"

"She left at sunset last night. It is now morning, and she has not returned or attempted to use her communicator."

"We fear..."

"...that she might..."

"...have fallen and..."

"...become immobile. Or perhaps even..."

"...unconscious..." said the Stardust Twins.

"I have sent the Historian and the Appraiser to look for her," said Bellidore.

"I can help, too," I offered.

"No, you have the last artifact to examine," he said. "When the Moriteu awakens, I will send it as well."

"What about the Mystic?" I asked.

Bellidore looked at the Mystic and sighed. "She has not said a word since landing on this world. In truth, I do not understand her function. At any rate, I do not know how to communicate with her."

The Stardust Twins kicked at the earth together, sending up a pair of reddish dust clouds.

"It seems ridiculous..." said one.

"...that we can find the tiniest artifact..." said the other.

"...but we cannot find..."

"...an entire exobiologist."

"Why do you not help search for it?" I asked.

"They get vertigo," explained Bellidore.

"We searched..."

"...the entire camp," they added defensively.

"I can put off assimilating the last piece until tomorrow, and help with the search," I volunteered.

"No," replied Bellidore. "I have sent for the ship. We will leave tomorrow, and I want all of our major finds examined by then. It is *my* job to find

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the Exobiologist; it is *yours* to read the history of the last artifact."

"If that is your desire," I said. "Where is it?"

He led me to a table where the Historian and the Appraiser had been examining it.

"Even *I* know what this is," said Bellidore. "An unspent cartridge." He paused. "Along with the fact that we have found no human artifacts on any higher strata, I would say this in itself is unique: a bullet that a man chose *not* to fire."

"When you state it in those terms, it *does* arouse the curiosity," I acknowledged.

"Are you..."

"...going to examine it..."

"...now?" asked the Stardust Twins apprehensively.

"Yes, I am," I said.

"Wait!" they shouted in unison.

I paused above the cartridge while they began backing away.

"We mean..."

"...no disrespect..."

"...but watching you examine artifacts..."

"...is too unsettling."

And with that, they raced off to hide behind some of the camp structures.

"What about you?" I asked Bellidore. "Would you like me to wait until you leave?"

"Not at all," he replied. "I find diversity fascinating. With your permission, I would like to stay and observe."

"As you wish," I said, allowing my body to melt around the cartridge until it had become a part of myself, and its history became my own history, as clear and precise as if it had all occurred yesterday...

* * *

"They are coming!"

Thomas Naikosiai looked across the table at his wife.

"Was there ever any doubt that they would?"

"This was foolish, Thomas!" she snapped. "They will force us to leave, and because we made no preparations, we will have to leave all our posses-

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sions behind."

"Nobody is leaving," said Naikosiai.

He stood up and walked to the closet. "You stay here," he said, donning his long coat and his mask. "I will meet them outside."

"That is both rude and cruel, to make them stand out there when they have come all this way."

"They were not invited," said Naikosiai. He reached deep into the closet and grabbed the rifle that leaned up against the back wall, then closed the closet, walked through the airlock and emerged on the front porch.

Six men, all wearing protective clothing and masks to filter the air, confronted him.

"It is time, Thomas," said the tallest of them.

"Time for *you*, perhaps," said Naikosiai, holding the rifle casually across his chest.

"Time for all of us," answered the tall man.

"I am not going anywhere. This is my home. I will not leave it."

"It is a pustule of decay and contamination, as is this whole country," came the answer. "We are all leaving."

Naikosiai shook his head. "My father was born on this land, and his father, and his father's father. *You* may run from danger, if you wish; I will stay and fight it."

"How can you make a stand against radiation?" demanded the tall man. "Can you put a bullet through it? How can you fight air that is no longer safe to breathe?"

"Go away," said Naikosiai, who had no answer to that, other than the conviction that he would never leave his home. "I do not demand that you stay. Do not demand that I leave."

"It is for your own good, Naikosiai," urged another. "If you care nothing for your own life, think of your wife's. How much longer can she breathe the air?"

"Long enough."

"Why not let *her* decide?"

"*I* speak for our family."

An older man stepped forward. "She is *my* daughter, Thomas," he said severely. "I will not allow you to condemn her to the life you have chosen for yourself. Nor will I let my grandchildren remain here."

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The old man took another step toward the porch, and suddenly the rifle was pointing at him.

"That's far enough," said Naikosiai.

"They are Maasai," said the old man stubbornly. "They must come with the other Maasai to our new world."

"You are not Maasai," said Naikosiai contemptuously. "Maasai did not leave their ancestral lands when the rinderpest destroyed their herds, or when the white man came, or when the governments sold off their lands. Maasai never surrender. *I* am the last Maasai."

"Be reasonable, Thomas. How can you not surrender to a world that is no longer safe for people to live on? Come with us to New Kilimanjaro."

"The Maasai do not run from danger," said Naikosiai.

"I tell you, Thomas Naikosiai," said the old man, "that I cannot allow you to condemn my daughter and my grandchildren to live in this hellhole. The last ship leaves tomorrow morning. They will be on it."

"They will stay with me, to build a new Maasai nation."

The six men whispered among themselves, and then their leader looked up at Naikosiai.

"You are making a terrible mistake, Thomas," he said. "If you change your mind, there is room for you on the ship."

They all turned to go, but the old man stopped and turned to Naikosiai.

"I will be back for my daughter," he said.

Naikosiai gestured with his rifle. "I will be waiting for you."

The old man turned and walked off with the others, and Naikosiai went back into his house through the airlock. The tile floor smelled of disinfectant, and the sight of the television set offended his eyes, as always. His wife was waiting for him in the kitchen, amid the dozens of gadgets she had purchased over the years.

"How can you speak with such disrespect to the Elders!" she demanded. "You have disgraced us."

"No!" he snapped. "*They* have disgraced us, by leaving!"

"Thomas, you cannot grow anything in the fields. The animals have all died. You cannot even breathe the air without a filtering mask. *Why* do you insist on staying?"

"This is our ancestral land. We will not leave it."

"But all the others — "

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"They can do as they please," he interrupted. "En-kai will judge them, as He judges us all. I am not afraid to meet my creator."

"But why must you meet him so soon?" she persisted. "You have seen the tapes and disks of New Kilimanjaro. It is a beautiful world, green and gold and filled with rivers and lakes."

"Once Earth was green and gold and filled with rivers and lakes," said Naikosiai. "They ruined this world. They will ruin the next one."

"Even if they do, we will be long dead," she said. "I want to go."

"We've been through all this before."

"And it always ends with an order rather than an agreement," she said. Her expression softened. "Thomas, just once before I die, I want to see water that you can drink without adding chemicals to it. I want to see antelope grazing on long green grasses. I want to walk outside without having to protect myself from the very air I breathe."

"It's settled."

She shook her head. "I love you, Thomas, but I cannot stay here, and I cannot let our children stay here."

"No one is taking my children from me!" he yelled.

"Just because you care nothing for *your* future, I cannot permit you to deny our sons *their* future."

"Their future is here, where the Maasai have always lived."

"Please come with us, Papa," said a small voice behind him, and Naikosiai turned to see his two sons, eight and five, standing in the doorway to their bedroom, staring at him.

"What have you been saying to them?" demanded Naikosiai suspiciously.

"The truth," said his wife.

He turned to the two boys. "Come here," he said, and they trudged across the room to him.

"What are you?" he asked.

"Boys," said the younger child.

"What *else*?"

"Maasai," said the older.

"That is right," said Naikosiai. "You come from a race of giants. There was a time when, if you climbed to the very top of Kilimanjaro, all the land you could see in every direction belonged to us."

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"But that was long ago," said the older boy.

"Someday it will be ours again," said Naikosiai. "You must remember who you are, my son. You are the descendant of Leeyo, who killed 100 lions with just his spear; of Nelion, who waged war against the whites and drove them from the Rift; of Sendayo, the greatest of all the *laibons*. Once the Kikuyu and the Wakamba and the Lumbwa trembled in fear at the very mention of the word Maasai. This is your heritage; do not turn your back on it."

"But the Kikuyu and the other tribes have all left."

"What difference does that make to the Maasai? We did not make a stand only against the Kikuyu and the Wakamba, but against *all* men who would have us change our ways. Even after the Europeans conquered Kenya and Tanganyika, they never conquered the Maasai. When Independence came, and all the other tribes moved to cities and wore suits and aped the Europeans, we remained as we had always been. We wore what we chose and we lived where we chose, for we were proud to be Maasai. Does that not *mean* something to you?"

"Will we not still be Maasai if we go to the new world?" asked the older boy.

"No," said Naikosiai firmly. "There is a bond between the Maasai and the land. We define it, and it defines us. It is what we have always fought for and always defended."

"But it is diseased now," said the boy.

"If I were sick, would you leave me?" asked Naikosiai.

"No, Papa."

"And just as you would not leave me in my illness, so we will not leave the land in *its* illness. When you love something, when it is a part of what you are, you do not leave it simply because it becomes sick. You stay, and you fight even harder to cure it than you fought to win it."

"But —"

"Trust me," said Naikosiai. "Have I ever misled you?"

"No, Papa."

"I am not misleading you now. We are En-kai's chosen people. We live on the ground He has given us. Don't you see that we *must* remain here, that we must keep our covenant with En-kai?"

"But I will never see my friends again!" wailed his younger son.

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"You will make new friends."

"Where?" cried the boy. "Everyone is gone!"

"Stop that at once!" said Naikosiai harshly. "Maasai do not cry."

The boy continued sobbing, and Naikosiai looked up at his wife.

"This is *your* doing," he said. "You have spoiled him."

She stared unblinking into his eyes. "Five-year-old boys are allowed to cry."

"Not Maasai boys," he answered.

"Then he is no longer Maasai, and you can have no objection to his coming with me."

"I want to go too!" said the eight-year-old, and suddenly he, too, forced some tears down his face.

Thomas Naikosiai looked at his wife and his children — really *looked* at them — and realized that he did not know them at all. This was not the quiet maiden, raised in the traditions of his people, that he had married nine years ago. These soft sobbing boys were not the successors of Leeyo and Nelion.

He walked to the door and opened it.

"Go to the new world with the rest of the black Europeans," he growled.

"Will you come with us?" asked his oldest son.

Naikosiai turned to his wife. "I divorce you," he said coldly. "All that was between us is no more."

He walked over to his two sons. "I disown you. I am no longer your father, you are no longer my sons. Now go!"

His wife puts coats and masks on both of the boys, then donned her own.

"I will send some men for my things before morning," she said.

"If any man comes onto my property, I will kill him," said Naikosiai.

She stared at him, a look of pure hatred. Then she took the children by the hands and led them out of the house and down the long road to where the ship awaited them.

Naikosiai paced the house for a few minutes, filled with nervous rage. Finally he went to the closet, donned his coat and mask, pulled out his rifle, and walked through the airlock to the front of his house. Visibility was poor, as always, and he went out to the road to see if anyone was coming.

There was no sign of any movement. He was almost disappointed. He planned to show them how a Maasai protected what was his.

And suddenly he realized that this was *not* how a Maasai protected his

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own. He walked to the edge of the gorge, opened the bolt, and threw his cartridges into the void one by one. Then he held the rifle over his head and hurled it after them. The coat came next, then the mask, and finally his clothes and shoes.

He went back into the house and pulled out that special trunk that held the memorabilia of a lifetime. In it he found what he was looking for: a simple piece of red cloth. He attached it at his shoulder.

Then he went into the bathroom, looking among his wife's cosmetics. It took almost half an hour to hit upon the right combinations, but when he emerged his hair was red, as if smeared with clay.

He stopped by the fireplace and pulled down the spear that hung there. Family tradition had it that the spear had once been used by Nelion himself; he wasn't sure he believed it, but it was definitely a Maasai spear, blooded many times in battle and hunts during centuries past.

Naikosiai walked out the door and positioned himself in front of his house — his *manyatta*. He planted his bare feet on the diseased ground, placed the butt of his spear next to his right foot, and stood at attention. Whatever came down the road next — a band of black Europeans hoping to rob him of his possessions, a lion out of history, a band of Nandi or Lumbwa come to slay the enemy of their blood, they would find him ready.

They returned just after sunrise the next morning, hoping to convince him to emigrate to New Kilimanjaro. What they found was the last Maasai, his lungs burst from the pollution, his dead eyes staring proudly out across the vanished savannah at some enemy only he could see.

* * *

I RELEASED THE cartridge, my strength nearly gone, my emotions drained.

So that was how it had ended for Man on earth, probably less than a mile from where it had begun. So bold and so foolish, so moral and so savage. I had hoped the last artifact would prove to be the final piece of the puzzle, but instead it merely added to the mystery of this most contentious and fascinating race.

Nothing was beyond their ability to achieve. One got the feeling that the

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day the first primitive man looked up and saw the stars, the galaxy's days as a haven of peace and freedom were numbered. And yet they came out to the stars not just with their lusts and their hatred and their fears, but with their technology and their medicine, their heroes as well as their villains. Most of the races of the galaxy had been painted by the Creator in pastels; Men were primaries.

I had much to think about as I went off to my quarters to renew my strength. I do not know how long I lay, somnolent and unmoving, recovering my energy, but it must have been a long time, for night had come and gone before I felt prepared to rejoin the party.

As I emerged from my quarters and walked to the center of camp, I heard a yell from the direction of the gorge, and a moment later the Appraiser appeared, a large sterile bag balanced atop an air trolly.

"What have you found?" asked Bellidore, and suddenly I remembered that the Exobiologist was missing.

"I am almost afraid to guess," replied the Appraiser, laying the bag on the table.

All the members of the party gathered around as he began withdrawing items: a blood-stained communicator, bent out of shape; the floating shade, now broken, that the Exobiologist used to protect her head from the rays of the sun; a torn piece of clothing; and finally, a single gleaming white bone.

The instant the bone was placed on the table, the Mystic began screaming. We were all shocked into momentary immobility, not only because of the suddenness of her reaction, but because it was the first sign of life she had shown since joining our party. She continued to stare at the bone and scream, and finally, before we could question her or remove the bone from her sight, she collapsed.

"I don't suppose there can be much doubt about what happened," said Bellidore. "The creatures caught up with the Exobiologist somewhere on her way down the gorge and killed her."

"Probably ate..."

"...her too," said the Stardust Twins.

"I am glad we are leaving today," continued Bellidore. "Even after all these millennia, the spirit of Man continues to corrupt and degrade this world. Those lumbering creatures can't possibly be predators: there are no meat animals left on Earth. But given the opportunity, they fell upon the

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Exobiologist and consumed her flesh. I have this uneasy feeling that if we stayed much longer, we, too, would become corrupted by this world's barbaric heritage."

The Mystic regained consciousness and began screaming again, and the Stardust Twins gently escorted her back to her quarters, where she was given a sedative.

"I suppose we might as well make it official," said Bellidore. He turned to the Historian. "Would you please check the bone with your instruments and make sure that this is the remains of the Exobiologist?"

The Historian stared at the bone, horror-stricken. "She was my *friend!*" it said at last. "I cannot touch it as if it were just another artifact."

"We must know for sure," said Bellidore. "If it is not part of the Exobiologist, then there is a chance, however slim, that your friend might still be alive."

The Historian reached out tentatively for the bone, then jerked its hand away. "I can't!"

Finally Bellidore turned to me. "He Who Views," he said. "Have you the strength to examine it?"

"Yes," I answered.

They all moved back to give me room, and I allowed my mass to slowly spread over the bone and engulf it. I assimilated its history and ingested its emotional residue, and finally I withdrew from it.

"It is the Exobiologist," I said.

"What are the funeral customs of her race?" asked Bellidore.

"Cremation," said the Appraiser.

"Then we shall build a fire and incinerate what remains of our friend, and we will each offer a prayer to send her soul along the Eternal Path."

And that is what we did.

The ship came later that day, and took us off the planet, and it is only now, safely removed from its influence, that I can reconstruct what I learned on that last morning.

I lied to Bellidore — to the entire party — for once I made my discovery I knew that my primary duty was to get them away from Earth as quickly as possible. Had I told them the truth, one or more of them would have wanted to remain behind, for they are scientists with curious, probing minds, and I

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would never be able to convince them that a curious, probing mind is no match for what I found in my seventh and final view of Olduvai Gorge.

The bone was *not* a part of the Exobiologist. The Historian, or even the Moriteu, would have known that had they not been too horrified to examine it. It was the tibia of a *Man*.

Man has been extinct for five thousand years, at least as we citizens of the galaxy have come to understand him. But those lumbering, ungainly creatures of the night, who seemed so attracted to our campfires, are what Man has become. Even the pollution and radiation he spread across his own planet could not kill him off. It merely changed him to the extent that we were no longer able to recognize him.

I could have told them the simple facts, I suppose: that a tribe of these pseudo-Men stalked the Exobiologist down the gorge, then attacked and killed and, yes, ate her. Predators are not unknown throughout the worlds of the galaxy.

But as I became one with the tibia, as I felt it crashing down again and again upon our companion's head and shoulders, I felt a sense of power, of exultation I had never experienced before. I suddenly seemed to see the world through the eyes of the bone's possessor. I saw how he had killed his own companion to create the weapon, I saw how he planned to plunder the bodies of the old and the infirm for more weapons, I saw visions of conquest against other tribes living near the gorge.

And finally, at the moment of triumph, he and I looked up at the sky, and we knew that someday all that we could see would be ours.

And this is the knowledge that I have lived with for two days. I do not know who to share it with, for it is patently immoral to exterminate a race simply because of the vastness of its dreams or the ruthlessness of its ambition.

But this is a race that refuses to die, and somehow I must warn the rest of us, who have lived in harmony for almost five millennia.

It's not over.

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COMING ATTRACTIONS

THE DECEMBER issue is a special issue, full of treats and surprises. When you get your copy, block out a few hours because you'll want to read it all at once. **Bryn Barnard**, the artist who did the cover, absolutely fell in love with the story he was illustrating. You will too. **Ursula K. Le Guin** is back with a novelette, "Solitude." A field ethnologist on the eleventh planet in the Soro system uses her children as a way into the native culture. The story, told by one of the children, is more than a first-contact tale. It is also about families, parenting, and doing the right thing.

Ray Bradbury is writing a lot of short fiction these days. His story, "From the Dust Returned," was a popular addition to our September issue, and we think you'll like "Last Rites" even better. Harrison Cooper has invented a time machine. Only once it's finished, he's not quite sure what he will do with it. Until a delivery boy gives him an idea that will take him — not to the start of a war or the birth of a religion — but on a mission of mercy throughout the ages.

Finally, with both joy and sorrow, we present December's final offering. Just before **Isaac Asimov** died, he mentioned his regret that he couldn't write his 400th column for *F&SF*. The Good Doctor's wife, **Janet**, spent the last two years combing papers and letters to provide us with that column. It is both a loving tribute to her husband and a sharp reminder of the things that made Isaac Asimov one of the most revered writers in our genre.

We have other surprises in store in our December issue, so if you aren't a subscriber, please take the time to fill out the subscription card in this volume. If you are a subscriber, you might want to make sure your subscription is current, or enter a subscription for a friend at the special holiday rates.

We will end 1994 with a bang and plan to continue the drum roll in 1995. Future issues will include other favorites from **Harlan Ellison** to **Jack Williamson**. We'll also continue to provide the most exciting new voices in the field like **Dale Bailey** and award-winner **Nina Kiriki Hoffman**. So keep reading and see why *Booklist* calls *F&SF* "the sf magazine that has consistently achieved the highest literary standards."

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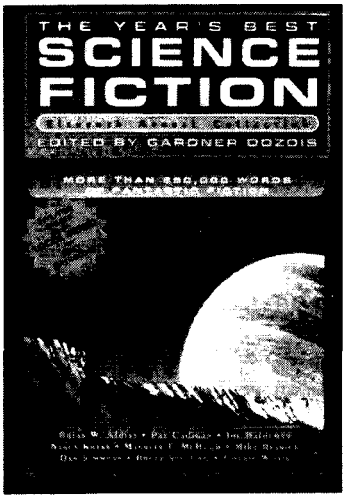

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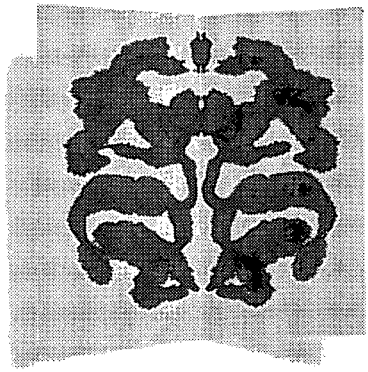

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